Do Trees Know When They Fall?

A Short Story Collection

Damon Stone

Contents

What It's Like To Be A Car 6

Ray & Roya 35

Thirty Legs 70

Dopamine Dead 103

Do Trees Know When They Fall? 145

Trails In The Afterlife 184

Shameless Self-Promotion

I like to put my stories - including the ones in this collection - on YouTube. I narrate them and make pretty background music. If you're interested in more Stone Stories and more psi-fi strangeness, then check out my channel:

https://www.youtube.com/@thedaemonstone

Dedication & Acknowledgements

These stories are “for” the curious. “For” those humble enough to wonder.

Actually, I wrote them “for” me. I am creatively selfish. But now that they’re finished, I dedicate them to the open minds of the world. Who else does art belong to, and who else do we have to thank for it?

As far as my “personal” thanks, it goes to those who remind me to ask questions - whether they do it with a stick or a carrot. Or by accident. That’s a broad stroke, but it’s the only stroke, so I can’t hope to name all of you. My life now revolves around creative space. If you have nurtured that in any way - if only by a word you didn’t realize was significant - then my gratitude for you is boundless.

5

Do Trees Know When They Fall?

What It's Like To Be A Car

Kevin doesn't remember becoming a car. All he knows is that he is one. A crossover, technically. Not quite an SUV, but with ample trunk space, all-wheel drive, and enough elevation to look down his nose at sedans, plebs that they are.

Kevin actually doesn't have a nose, and couldn't tell you what one is. He couldn't tell you anything, because he's a car. But this expression more or less captures the vague notion of pride he enjoys in the quality of his design and the broadness of his market appeal. Rain falls and washes a few smears of bird shit from his windshield, his hood, his front passenger door. The water soothes his tired frame, as a good bath always does. His coat of turquoise paint will look extra glossy when the sun comes out again. Kevin is pretty vain about this too. All the other cars in his apartment parking lot are dull, boring colors—beige, silver, white, gray—oh, excuse him!—*space gray*. They should be jealous of him, but they aren't. They enjoy their banal conformity.

Pride, vanity, enjoyment, conformity…what are these things again? Kevin can't say. He can't speak. He shouldn't even have feelings—he's a car. How is this possible? Something isn't right. These emotions *do* exist in him, but they're distant. Buried under a thick layer of the quiet, unthinking sturdiness of steel, the transparency of glass.

Somewhere in that faraway pit of human emotions wells a tide of panic. This is wrong. *Existence* is wrong. Kevin shouldn't be a car. *Can't* be. How did this happen? He wasn't always a car. He knows this. He was a person, a human being. He knows what humans are—he was made for them, lives for them. Nothing makes him happier than when his owner—Neoma—comes out on the weekends and drives him. Driving to work is great too, but it's routine. Expected. Kevin has touchscreen navigation, so Neoma's route to work has been etched into unfading digital memory. On the weekends though, every drive is a surprise. Kevin gets to see new sights, to explore roads his tires have never tread upon.

He shouldn't be able to "see," or "hear," because he doesn't have eyes or ears. He knows what eyes and ears are, but like noses, he can't tell you anything about them. He can't *express* his simple thoughts, his unquestioned knowledge.

But he can see, and he can hear, and he can even *smell*. If Kevin could swear an oath, he'd draw a sign over himself and insist that he can *taste* the gravel on his tires—cross his engine and hope to die. The most blissful experience he's ever had was when Neoma parked in the lawn at a house party, and Kevin spent the night feeling one with the grass and the Earth.

But, again, none of this makes sense. How can he be thinking any of this? He shouldn't be a car, and certainly not a thinking one. It's against the rules…what rules? The rules of the universe, obviously. People aren't cars! But Kevin is. He has been for as long as he can remember—two years and sixty-seven days, to be exact. The data in his GPS system tells him so.

No. Fuck, no! This is impossible. But it feels so right. Any thoughts of protest are whispers, far away. But they are insistent. They nag at him.

Kevin…Kevin got high, right? He tried some new drug…what was it? Saul…no…soy…saliva? No, that's not a drug. What *is* a drug? What does that word mean? What are words?

Ooh! None of that matters now. Neoma's here! She opens the door and sits in the driver's seat, peeling a darkened, rain-soaked strand of hair from her cheek. She tears open a pack of cigarettes, puts one in her mouth and lights it. She grunts suddenly and drops the lighter onto the mat that protects Kevin's interior from the debris and filth of shoes. Neoma shakes pain from her hand and picks the lighter back up again, taking a long drag of the cigarette. She stretches her legs out the open door and lets the rain soak into her slippers.

What's up with this? Kevin has never seen Neoma smoke before. In fact, he doesn't like it. It'll make him stink.

She blows smoke out into the atmosphere and takes another drag. The silver lining here is that she left the door open.

After a few minutes, she drops her cigarette onto the pavement and stamps it out. She sighs and climbs out of Kevin, swinging his door shut with her hip. Kevin allows himself some mild disappointment. He thought they were going for a drive. That's always what it means when Neoma comes. Once in a while she'd come out with Rex, and the two of them would sit in Kevin for hours, listening to music and talking. Rex would smoke pot, which Kevin didn't like, but he always did it with the window down, and that counted for something. Anyway, even on these rare occasions, they'd at least be running Kevin's engine.

Not this time. What a tease.

Kevin spends the rest of the night wondering about Neoma's strange behavior. He hopes she's all right.

Wonder and hope are different when you're a car. They aren't *encompassing,* the way they are for humans—they're dim, in the background, like the rest of Kevin's thoughts. Most of his perception is tied up in the immediate sensation of the rain, the breeze—the itch of rust developing on his underside. Nights are lonely for the cars in this lot. They can't speak to each other. There's no camaraderie among them, no

companionship. Vehicles don't have the social instincts that humans do. They don't wish for it, either. Cars only wish to be driven, or at least *used* in some way. An engine that isn't running feels like a tumor, and the longer it doesn't run, the further the cancer spreads.

Once in a while, a couple will come along at night and have car sex. It's better than nothing—for the car, that is. Vehicles have no conception of sexuality, so it's not like they get any kind of voyeuristic thrill from it. But it's *something*—it involves at minimum an opening and closing of doors, which usually turns on an interior light or two. That tinge of electricity through the circuits is like a warm match on a cold night. It's a small drop of aliveness onto a tongue that is slowly dying.

Kevin has only experienced car sex once, as a car. He was still pretty new when it happened—only a few months off the lot, about four thousand miles on his odometer. It was Rex's birthday and Neoma brought him in and they gave it a whirl. They didn't get very far. It was more like a wrestling match. Kevin didn't know what wrestling was, but that's what they said afterward. They mostly just giggled at how difficult the act was, logistically speaking. After about an hour of on-and-off attempts, interspersed with jokes and laughter, they gave up and went back into their apartment. The jostling was awkward for Kevin. The feeling of their weight shifting back and forth on his suspension was

unnatural, like wearing a glove that doesn't quite fit. That's what Kevin would have compared it to when he was human.

Wait, was he ever human, though? That wouldn't make sense. How could he ever have been human?

Well anyway, Neoma and Rex never tried car sex again. There was an old, silver minivan across the parking lot that used to see a lot of action overnights, but Kevin hasn't seen this van for months. Probably, the tenants moved out. Or maybe they crashed and died and the van got totaled.

Kevin's gravest fear is to be totaled. It's the only blemish on the otherwise perfect rapture that comes from a good drive. Underneath all that highway ecstasy, a tiny voice always pokes at him—smaller and quieter even than the vague ripples that pass for his usual "thoughts"—saying in not even a whisper: *she could destroy you today.*

Neoma comes out the next morning and cleans months of accumulated clutter and garbage from Kevin's interior. It feels good. The human Kevin would have compared it to the feeling of an overdue shower.

It's a sunny morning. Neoma looks pale, unkempt. The freckles on her face are bare and noticeable—usually, they're concealed by makeup. She's dressed in baggy pajamas.

She has a black trash bag that fills up in about two minutes—mostly with debris from Chinese restaurants. Having Chinese in the car is a weekly tradition for Neoma and Rex. Throwing the aftermath of trash onto Kevin's floor is a cherished part of that tradition. Why is she breaking it now?

She opens Kevin's glovebox and pulls out Scoob—Rex's favorite bowl for getting baked in the car. She turns it in bony fingers, the blackened glass pockmarked with dots of its original orange color. She lifts it up, and it almost looks like she's going to put it in her mouth. But then she tosses it in the garbage bag.

Scoob, in a landfill! What will Rex think? Did he get a new bowl? Even if he did, he would never let Neoma chuck Scoob so callously, without a proper burial. Kevin searches her face, but there's no expression in it. Or maybe he just can't read facial expressions like he used to. That's a human thing.

Neoma plops down onto Kevin's passenger seat, kicking her legs out the open door again, and lights up another cigarette. She turns and stares at the car seat strapped into Kevin's rear. Still no expression, no discernible emotion on her face. Kevin would be concerned if he was human—and he is concerned, as far as an automobile can be. For him, the emotion is mechanical. Neoma's strange behavior is like a check

engine light, and if Kevin could talk he would tell her to go see a mechanic.

A beam of sunlight is right in Neoma's face. She doesn't blink. It gives her hazel eyes a tinge of gold. Smoke streams out of her nostrils. Some of it wafts out the open door, but at least half of it floats toward the car seat.

Kevin doesn't like that. He refuses to become some smelly car. A little clutter was one thing—at least there was a kind of sentimentality buried under the empty boxes of noodles. But the smell of smoke and decay? That's for used cars. Clunkers. Shit-mobiles parked in dilapidated neighborhoods.

Neoma shakes herself and turns her head and blows a small puff of smoke outside. Good. Maybe it was just an honest mistake.

But why? What the hell is going on with her?

She finishes her smoke and carries her old memories with Kevin over to the dumpsters.

It's morning the day after Kevin's cleanup. Neoma comes out and straps her daughter into the car seat. Nyssa is three years old, dressed all in pink. She clutches a filthy stuffed rabbit in her fingers, and occasionally her mouth.

Neoma walks around to the driver's side and gets in and puts her keys in the ignition. This is a

wonderful feeling for Kevin. If he was human, he would make an innuendo out of it.

Neoma turns the key and Kevin fires up. Warmth from the engine courses through his lines like a perfect mix of opiates and uppers. It's the bliss of divine love finally falling upon a lost soul—the return of feeling to paralyzed limbs.

Neoma backs him out of his parking space and they get onto the road. Heavenly delight becomes euphoria as Kevin accelerates to a cruise—thirty miles per hour through the neighborhood, then forty-five on the main road.

All of Kevin's strange fears about his existence as a car have been blown away like stale exhaust fumes. How could anyone *not* want to be a car? This is how eagles must feel—free, alive, and damn near invincible, the confining Earth reduced to a blur below you.

Kevin loses himself in the joy of the drive for a while, but is soon brought back to reality as Nyssa and Neoma begin to talk. They've both been unusually quiet, and all this mystery and weirdness is becoming as much as a car can bear. It's worth pulling his attention away from the rapture of flight to get to the bottom of things.

"Mommy," Nyssa says. "Why are we going to daddy's house?"

"What do you mean, 'why'?" Neoma chuckles.

"Why does he have a house?"

"It's Grandma and Grandpa's house," Neoma says gently. "We've been there like a million times. Remember when we talked about this?"

Nyssa stares out the window for a few minutes, rabbit ears at her lips. Neoma glances at her in the rear view.

"Daddy's staying with Grandma and Grandpa," Nyssa says. It's half a question.

"See, stinky! Told ya you'd remember."

Nyssa doesn't giggle at the nickname. Usually she does.

Neoma leaves Kevin running in Grandma and Grandpa's driveway while she drops Nyssa off inside. Another weird novelty. Kevin isn't used to idling. Neoma read somewhere that it was bad for the car in the long run. She's a good owner. She cares about Kevin.

This is probably the best driveway Kevin has ever parked in. It's like a brush stroke of perfectly black paint between two lush green lawns. A driveway this smooth is heaven for your tires—for a human, Kevin would compare it to lying on a bed so soft you seem to float in it, the pillows neither too soft nor too hard. There are beautiful flowers lining the house of relaxing, cool colors—blues and greens and lavenders. Their

aroma wafts over the driveway, bathing Kevin in a homely calm. It has occurred to him, occasionally, that he shouldn't be able to smell anything, since he's a car. But he can never concentrate on this train of thought for very long.

Rex's parents have a luxury SUV, a real big one. Kevin enjoys sitting with it. It has a sturdy presence. A well put-together machine. Kevin prefers to hang out with high-end vehicles. He's the newest and most well-kept car in Neoma's parking lot, and he doesn't like that. Neoma had a friend in Kevin's passenger seat once, and she said: "Never be the smartest person in the room." If Kevin could talk, he would tell you his feelings are equivalent to this. Never be the nicest car in the lot.

There's nothing rational about this notion, and Kevin almost knows it. Almost, but not quite. It's actually a mistranslation of emotions from before… before what?

Oh well. It doesn't matter. Neoma comes out of the house after just a couple of minutes. Usually they stay here much longer.

Kevin doesn't mind, much as he enjoys the company of the SUV. Now they get to drive again.

They go down into the city and park in another familiar place—a parking lot sandwiched between a clutter of buildings. Work. Kevin doesn't know which of

the four buildings surrounding this lot Neoma works in. Even if he knew how to read, there's no signage that would give him a clue. Kevin has heard Neoma joke with coworkers that their parking lot is in the asshole of the city. It's an apt description. All these buildings have their asses turned to the lot. Kevin just sits here and stares at one of these featureless brick walls for nine hours per day, five days per week. The other cars here are agreeable enough—of more or less the same quality and variety as those at Neoma's apartment. But he wouldn't choose to hang out with them if it weren't for work. They get along with each other, but keep a formal distance.

Around noon, Neoma comes out with a friend and they have lunch in Kevin. They take him to a fast food place, go through the drive-thru, and then park up while they eat. Kevin loves this. New parking lots are always exciting. The scenery is different every time, and in this case it's much more interesting than a brick wall. Now Kevin is facing a gas station, and he can see the street—a three-lane boulevard with stoplights all along it. Watching traffic is a favorite hobby for Kevin and he soaks it up whenever the opportunity presents itself.

He spends a good while absorbed in this before his attention drifts back to Neoma and her friend. They've finished with small talk and work gossip, and for some reason Kevin finds it vitally important to listen

to what they're saying now. He doesn't know why, but their conversation feels existentially, cosmically significant for him.

"So it's temporary," says Neoma's friend. Her name is Shawna. Kevin sees her at least once a month.

"That's what we settled on," Neoma replies.

"Do you *want* it to be temporary?"

Neoma takes a long, steady breath, which turns out to be a drag on another cigarette. Kevin didn't notice that she had lit one up. She blows the smoke out the window. "I don't know what I want."

"Well, what does *he* want?"

"He doesn't know either. That's the whole issue." Neoma sticks her hand outside and taps some ash out of her cigarette. The wind blows bits of it into Kevin's treads. "He doesn't know who he is. He isn't *about* anything. It's all weed and video games and music that goes nowhere."

Shawna takes her milkshake out of Kevin's console cup holder and sips it. The shake is sweating. Kevin can feel the moisture as she slides it back into the cup holder.

"Does he need to be 'about' anything?"

Neoma snorts. "Uhh, yes. Everyone has something. Everyone needs an 'About.'"

"Who says?"

"No one needs to *say,*" Neoma says. "It just is. It's an unspoken agreement from society. You have to be about something in life."

"Why?"

"Because!" Neoma flicks her cigarette out onto the pavement, a touch of agitation in her voice. "Because what's the point otherwise? Why deal with it? Why grind for rent? Why take shit from some boss? Why listen to political bullshit? Why have a kid? There has to be a why. There has to be something it's all about or it isn't worth the hassle."

"Damn, all right," Shawna says, nibbling on a French fry. "So what's your About?"

Neoma sighs, deflating like a punctured tire. "I don't know about my About."

"Well isn't that, like, a problem?"

Neoma shrugs. "Depends what you consider problematic."

Shawna clicks her tongue. "Girl, ten seconds ago you were damn near breathing fire talking about how important it is to be about something in life."

Neoma chuckles. "All right, yes, I get it. I'm ironic."

"Irony ain't it. According to your own standards, you are a problem. How are you gonna drop someone from your life because he doesn't have an About when you don't have an About yourself?"

"Nyssa," Neoma blurts quickly. "Nyssa is enough of an About for both of us."

"Doesn't sound like it. Nyssa is *an* About, but what if you had never had her? What would your About have been then?"

"But we did have her."

"Say you didn't." Shawna jiggles a fry in front of Neoma's face. "See this? This is Nyssa." Shawna flings the fry out Kevin's window. "There she goes. Gone. She was a dream. Not even that. Say you'd never had her. What would *you,* Neoma, be all about?"

Neoma laughs, and then she's quiet. "Well," she says thoughtfully, then pauses again. "Rex isn't a bad father. That's not the issue here."

"I know he isn't. That's not what I asked. You're avoiding the question."

Neoma sighs. Shawna munches on the last of her fries and crinkles up the wrapper to her burger that had been resting on Kevin's dash. She looks outside and watches a seagull pecking at the fry she threw onto the pavement.

"You know what it is?" Neoma finally says. "It's that he should be some kind of example. Now more than ever he needs an About. For Nyssa. What is she gonna learn from him? How to roll a joint? He's loving and he's generally around and available, and I get that

a lot of dads aren't and it counts for something. But doesn't it take more than just that?"

"*Neoma*." Shawna squeezes her friend's face between her palms. Neoma giggles. "Neoma, look at me. I'm not saying you're wrong. But you're avoiding the question. What are you *about?* What is Nyssa going to learn from *you?*"

Neoma shakes her head free from Shawna's grip. "I take care of people!" She spurts, with a note of defensiveness.

"Damn right you do," Shawna assures her. "Everyone. Everyone around you is nurtured. You work at a homeless shelter for fuck's sake."

"So isn't that something? I have an About. And Nyssa can learn something valuable from it."

"Sure. But there's one person you *don't* take care of enough."

Neoma looks at Shawna. Shawna looks back and smiles. "Neoma, please look in the mirror and meet my friend."

Neoma scoffs. "I don't even know what that's supposed to mean."

Shawna rolls her eyes. "Yeah you do, you just don't want to. Do you have the bag?" Shawna holds up her burger wrapper and other garbage, looking for the takeout bag to put it in.

Neoma puts Kevin in reverse and starts to back out. “Just throw it in the back,” she says.

After work, Neoma climbs into Kevin with a strange man. His hair is so long that he sits on it. Kevin can feel it through his passenger seat cushion. It’s itchy. The man’s beard is long too, coming down over his gut in dirty blond strands.

Neoma reaches over him toward his seat belt. He squints at her. She quickly pulls her arm back as the man pulls the seatbelt across his chest.

“Sorry,” she says. She puts her keys in the ignition and turns Kevin on.

“You think I never been in a car before?” The guy says. He phrases it kindly, as a genuine question.

“No, I was just…I don’t know…I’m just…” Neoma’s face is red. She stares down into her lap.

“Are you sure about this?” The guy asks.

“Sure about what?”

“I mean, *this.* You and me sitting in this car and going somewhere.”

Neoma finally looks up from her lap. She puts Kevin in reverse and backs him out of her parking space. “If I wasn’t sure about it, I wouldn’t be doing it.”

The guy laughs. “Maybe some people are like that. But most aren’t.”

Neoma puts Kevin in drive. The feeling of his gears shifting is like a good stretch or massage. “Are *you* sure about it? If you’re uncomfortable we don’t have to go.”

“No, it’s fine.” He shrugs. “I just don’t get it. I have nothing to offer you.”

They reach the stop sign at the edge of the parking lot and Neoma brakes hard. “Who says that?” She turns on him with fierce compassion. “Who? Who told you you have nothing to offer?”

The guy gestures casually at everything. “The general situation.”

“Well, it’s bullshit,” Neoma tells him. “Just because you’ve had a hard time doesn't mean you have nothing to offer.”

The guy shrugs. “All right.”

Neoma looks at him for a moment, then turns Kevin onto the road and accelerates. “You have plenty to offer,” she says. “You shouldn’t believe whoever told you otherwise.”

“All right,” the guy says.

Neither of them speak for the rest of the drive. In three minutes and forty-seven seconds, they arrive at a fast food place and park by a window facing the dining room.

Neoma and her new friend go inside and sit down and eat. They choose a table by the window.

Kevin watches for the next two hours while they talk. He can't hear what they're saying. But it looks like Neoma is doing most of the talking.

Neoma and her friend get back into Kevin. The guy buckles his seatbelt and says in a wearied voice: "Well, thanks for dinner."

Neoma smiles and looks at him warmly. "Thank *you*. Thanks for coming out and listening."

"Yeah," he says.

"I guess I needed it," Neoma chuckles.

"Yeah."

They drive back to Neoma's work and park in her usual spot. The guy unbuckles his seatbelt. "So when are you moving in?" He asks.

"Moving in?"

"Yeah. Sounds like you and me are gonna be roommates."

Neoma laughs awkwardly. "Umm…I don't follow."

"You just spent all night talking about how you can't afford rent anymore."

Neoma stops smiling.

"You got a kid and you can't afford it alone," the guy continues. "And now you're alone."

Neoma just looks at him.

"When ya movin' in?" He asks again.

"It's not…" Neoma fidgets, lacing and unlacing her fingers. "It isn't…it won't…come to that."

"How won't it? You said you did the math. It doesn't add up. You can't afford your own life."

"Well, just for now." Neoma stares straight out Kevin's windshield. She takes his steering wheel in her hands and squeezes it. Kevin can feel the oil on her palms.

"'Til when? What's gonna change?"

"Something will work out," Neoma says.

"Magically?"

"*No!*" Neoma shouts. The guy watches her without blinking.

Neoma keeps squeezing Kevin's steering wheel. It would hurt if he could feel pain. "I'm sorry," she says. "Thank you for coming out with me."

The guy looks at her for another minute and shrugs. He opens Kevin's door and climbs out. "See ya soon," he says.

From there, Neoma and Kevin drive back to Rex's parents' house and pick up Nyssa. Neither of them say anything for most of the trip home. Soft golden streaks from passing streetlights brush Neoma's face as they drive along. Nyssa seems hypnotized by the pattern. She stares at her mother, at the night going by.

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

Neoma blinks. “Nothing, baby.”

At 3:23 AM, Neoma throws open Kevin’s door and dives into the driver’s seat. Her face is tear-soaked and her hair has devolved into a bed of knots. She sucks long, hard gasps of air through her nose and blows them out her mouth, as if disgusted by the taste of it. The first snow of the year dusts the windshield. If a breeze comes, it’ll be blown into nothingness. Neoma breathes clouds that waft up and dissolve against the powdered glass.

She slams the door shut as hard as she can, murdering the silence of morning. She screams and pounds her fists on Kevin’s dash. The fabric of reality trembles with the hit, as if some wrathful goddess behind the veil had wound up and punched her creation. Kevin feels an appropriate, almost human sense of alarm. Neoma screams again, this one longer and louder, beginning as a pained whimper low in her gut, and then winding up through her chest, rising into a shrill howl that trembles Kevin’s frame. Neoma thrashes back and forth in her seat, grabbing the steering wheel and shaking it in desperate agony.

Somehow, her emotions have taken on cosmic proportions. Her next scream shatters Kevin’s windows. Shards of his glass pepper the pavement as wisps of snow drift through the gap where the windshield was,

tickling his seat cushions. Kevin feels disemboweled. But he has no time to dwell on that. The universe is quaking. Reality twists and coils as Neoma wrenches at the steering wheel, colors and sounds blurring, vibrating, melding with her tortured voice.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this!" Her screams come from everywhere now. Reality flashes in and out of coherency. What images Kevin can make out are carnage and mayhem—cars in his parking lot tossed like toys, thrown into one another, crushed under the weight of each other. Blown out tires form a funnel, a tornado throwing glass and heaps of twisted metal all over the lot and into the building.

Kevin is somehow at the center of it. He's unharmed in comparison, though he does feel his parts slowly bending and coming undone, his frame crumpling under the weight of Neoma's misery. Her voice comes again, shrieking from every atom—even from Kevin himself.

"IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE LIKE THIS!!"

If Kevin had lungs, he would also scream. This is the end. Not just of him, but of everything. As a car, he hasn't thought much about death. He's known only that he wants to be a functioning vehicle—that to be totaled is a thing to avoid, to fear only in his muted way.

But now he feels it. He feels every emotion. This dread is *supra*-human. All of Neoma's reality-warping

pain is now his, and he doesn't know where it will lead. This isn't only the death of Kevin—the car, the individual—this is the death of Being itself. What afterlife could survive a calamity like this?

Another cosmic Neoma-scream ripples through existence, mourning the life she never had. The fabric of Being finally gives in, unable to withstand her throttling any longer. It comes apart in one neat, undulating motion that Kevin—whatever is left of him—compares to a zipper. That thought is the last thing to ever exist. At the end of time, there is only a strange notion, a disembodied concept—the idea that existence has been unzipped forever, and that the zipper itself has broken with it.

When nothing exists, there is no time. And so Kevin, after what feels like an instant—not even that—wakes up on his bathroom floor.

Bathroom? Yes, it is a bathroom. He can feel the floor tiles on his skin.

Skin…he *has* skin!

He bolts upright, running his arms—*real* arms—from his chest up to the top of his head, then down to his knees. He takes a fistful of greasy hair in his right hand and savors the texture of his jeans between the fingertips of his left.

He's real. He's alive. He's *human*.

For the first time in all his thirty years, Kevin cries with happiness. Those thirty years happened. He *remembers*. He had a childhood, teenage angst, relationships, love. He had a fiancee. They had a life, an apartment. This is it—he's in their bathroom. On the floor. Why?

He stops sobbing and looks up at the counter. A glass bong is sitting on it, coated in years of blackened filth.

That's right. She left him. He's losing the apartment. He has a month to pack his shit and get out.

He grabs the edge of the counter and drags himself up, slowly getting his feet under him. He isn't weak or in pain. His head is just zonked and the melodramatic gesture feels appropriate.

Kevin holds the bong up to the light. He can see almost none of the light through all the tar and buildup. This bong is no stranger to strange nights. But tonight was a completely new category of weird. What the hell happened?

Kevin remembers meeting his plug at a diner, as he often did. They ate pancakes together and Kevin spent all of brunch complaining about his situation and how he "didn't know what to do now." Afterward, they went out to the plug's car. Now that he thinks back on it, Kevin feels bad for that car. It looked like decay. It was a beige sedan, dented from multiple fender-

benders. The wheels were rimless. The driver's side door was whiter than the rest of the car. Having lived as a car, Kevin shudders to imagine what it must be like to be so…*decrepit*.

The plug had opened his passenger door and dug through the glovebox. He produced a small baggie. It contained a couple of tiny black nuggets, each about the size of Kevin's thumbnail. The plug slapped the baggie onto the palm of Kevin's hand.

"Feast your lungs on this," he'd said, grinning mysteriously.

Kevin poked at the nuggets through the plastic. They looked greasy. Oily. Unappetizing. "What are these, your dingleberries?" He asked.

The plug frowned. "Be more respectful when you talk about Sally. She's a teacher. You are in need of education, my friend."

"Who the fuck is Sally?"

The plug shook his head. He looked just like an unwashed hippie, complete with bell-bottoms and a beanie, shaggy and unshaven, purple-tinted sunglasses even on a gray morning. "What did I just say about respect, space bro? Sally's gonna show you what to do with your life so I don't have to listen to you bitch about it. I can't have you bringing down my vibration like this."

"But what *is* it?"

The plug's car door creaked as he swung it shut. A few flakes of rust fell by his tire. "Just smoke it." He ambled around to the other side of his car, perpetually dazed.

"But what is it?" Kevin repeated. "How much do you want for it?"

The discolored door of the sedan shrieked as the plug wrenched it open. He plopped onto the seat. "Just!" He batted his hands around his head, trying to shoo away the bad vibes. "Go home. And smoke it. You'll learn everything you want to know, and everything you *don't* want to know. Your shit will be figured out expeditiously."

Kevin looks into the bathroom mirror. A human face looks back at him—brown eyed, black-haired, scruffy beard. Pale to the point of sickliness. It's a baffled face. Existentially dumbfounded. It is anything but "educated."

Two years as a car. That was anything but "expeditious." He *lived* those two years. What was he supposed to have learned?

He opens the door and staggers out of the bathroom, bong in hand. He crosses the hallway to his bedroom and looks at the clock. 8:03 PM. He had gone into the bathroom to smoke around 7:40.

Two years in *twenty-three minutes?*

He shakes his head. Everything is as he'd left it. The floor is decorated with days of dirty laundry. The bed hasn't been made since she left. Everything is silent. He hears no neighbors, no activity outside, no traffic. Nothing. Up in the closet, his old guitar sits in a bed of dust, strings brown and rusted out. Kevin thinks about playing it, but decides he doesn't want to get tetanus.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he mutters. By thirty, he should have been the digital-age hero of folk music. He was supposed to be the Bob Dylan of the twenty-first century.

He wanders into the living room. HIs controllers and gaming console sit on the TV stand, occupying the only dustless spot. The coffee table in the center of the room is littered with crumbs of weed and resin. Two burned out bowls lie together in the mess. Two. She'd left hers behind.

He looks at the bong in his hand. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," he says again, more loudly this time. He goes into the kitchen, takes the trash can out from under the sink and drops the bong inside. He returns to the living room and sweeps the bowls and debris off the coffee table and into the garbage.

Nobody is in the parking lot when he goes out to the dumpster. The brisk air tickles his throat. A few stray snowflakes swirl in his path, the first of the year.

Out of habit, he scans the lot, looking for that turquoise crossover he always admires. He's never met the neighbor who owns it. Never even seen them, come to think of it. But they must be interesting, to own a vehicle like that.

He looks in every direction, but he doesn't find it.

Ray & Roya

I lost my children in both of my lives. You'd think once would be enough. I have to endure it as two different people.

"Let's get back to your dreams," Dr. Rupert says. That's what he calls my other life. "Dreams." I don't blame him, because that's what I tell him I'm dealing with. You need to massage the truth in a situation like this. I spend my career on the other side of the couch, and I know what I would think—professionally, as a clinician, if not emotionally—if some grief-addled woman wandered into my office talking about living an alternate life.

He clicks his pen ceremoniously. White light burns through the blinds behind his desk. I close my eyes and the striped pattern glows violet. "What happened to you last night?" His voice sounds the way peanut butter tastes. I know that's an odd description. But it's accurate—smooth, light, and soothing. It's become a ritual comfort for me, seeing nothing and hearing only Dr. Rupert and the hum of an air vent.

"I don't know," I say.

"Roya."

I sigh. I love when he says my name.

"Were you driving again? Another dream of this red Camaro?"

"No."

"What then?"

I shrug. "Aren't we about out of time?"

"We have ten more minutes."

"Ten minutes until I'm out the door?"

"Ten minutes," he repeats, "until the end of our session."

"That means business is done," I declare.

"Oh?" He chuckles.

"Ten minutes, Doctor! Tick-tock. I've talked enough. Come over here and talk to *me*."

I hear him get up from his desk. The air shifts a bit. He's standing over me.

"What do you want me to say?" He asks innocently.

"Tell me what *you* dream about."

I feel his weight sink into the couch. He touches my ankle with a finger and slides it slowly up my leg, over my chest, and up to my face. A soft, pink light pulses under my eyelids.

"I dream of quite exotic things," he whispers.

"Tell me," I moan.

The finger moves the strap of my dress and slips it off my shoulder.

"Better to show you," he says.

I could have cried, handing the guy the keys. I think he could tell. He had these black eyes that sort of looked through you.

"Don't worry," he said, jingling the keys. "I'll treat her like my own daughter."

"Yeah," I said. I smiled. I wasn't about to cry in front of some dude.

He smiled back. The sun made his black hair glisten. When transferring the title to him I discovered his legal name was Benjamin Franklin. I didn't know if that was a joke or a coincidence. "So," he said. "Ray's Pizza Parlor, eh? Over on the East Side, right? Maybe I'll swing by sometime. I got a buddy who swears by your calzones."

"Okay," I told him. I hoped he wouldn't. I didn't want to see him again. Young hotshot making off with my car. He didn't look like the real Ben Franklin. This guy was long, dark and handsome. I put the roll of cash in my pocket and looked down at the street.

He scratched at the sweaty dewdrops in his hair. "Well. Pleasure doing business with ya."

Benjamin Franklin got in my cherry-red Camaro and drove it away and that was the end of it. It felt like divorce all over again.

I started walking and told myself: *no one needs a car in New York.*

Two little children are running around the subway train like animals. I can't even tell who's responsible for them.

"Bang!" The boy says to the girl, pointing a finger-gun at her. She screams in agony and crashes onto the seat next to me, dead.

The boy runs up and puts his finger against her head. "Bang, bang, bang *bang!*" The girl twitches and convulses with every shot.

I look around. Everyone pretends not to notice. I scan the faces and try to guess who brought these demons on board.

A text from a client pops up on my watch. *Roya?* It says. *I think I'm having delusions.*

I sigh and ignore it. The little boy points his gun at me. "BANG!!" He yells.

I slump dead in my seat, my corpse rocking with the motion of the train. The boy and girl laugh like maniacs.

The hold music was infuriating. Some happy horseshit pop song. I couldn't tell the gender of the singer. They kept trying to encourage me. *You can be who you wanna be,* they'd say. Or, *you only live once.*

These are debatable points.

In between all the fake positivity I had to listen to Chad and Kyle out in the kitchen.

"Bro, are you deadass?" Kyle asked. He was spreading dough over the counter, his hands powdered white.

"On my mama bro," Chad replied, sliding a pizza into the oven. "Bitches there don't even suck dick. Trash school, bro."

"How long did you stay there?"

"Like a week, dude."

Kyle threw his head back and laughed like he'd never heard a funnier thing. "Bro, *what?*"

"I'm being so deadass, bro," Chad said.

The hold music finally cut off. "All right, you still with me, Ray?" Vinny said in my ear.

I turned and leaned over my desk and covered my other ear. "Yeah, yeah. Go ahead."

"What the hell's all that?"

"All what?"

A pan fell over in the kitchen. Chad and Kyle pointed at each other and made accusatory noises.

"*That,*" Vinny said. "Are you at a farm?"

"Eh, I had to hire some kids."

"How's that working out?"

"They fuckin' suck." I covered the phone. "Hey!" I yelled. "Shut up for a minute!"

They were quiet for about four seconds and then they started giggling again.

"Well, how about some more good news?" Vinny said.

"Thrill me."

"You're gonna be out of business in a month."

I pushed my chair back, but it's a small office. The back of my head hit the wall.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Well," Vinny sighed. "Money is this thing they invented to make the world run, and you don't have any."

"But you got my check right? The check from the car? You ran my numbers with the check?"

"Oh yeah. All right, maybe two months."

"Christ al-fucking-mighty. How? How is this possible?"

"It's just math, buddy. Your business is no longer solvent."

"Fuck." I sat there shaking my head for a minute. The light above my office flickered and hummed. Two flies chased each other beneath it. Chad asked Kyle if he was deadass.

"Look," Vinny said gently. "I figure we're old friends and I can give it to you straight. You're a straight-talking guy. So I just figure—"

"No, yes, good. No bullshit. I'm just trying to… what are my options here? Give me some options."

It sounded like Vinny put food in his mouth. "Well," he mumbled. "Option A is to make more money quick, fast, and in a hurry. Option B is to make even more money in an even bigger hurry. Or, you could go with option C, which is to close the business."

"I sold my car, Vin," I said. My voice sounded small. Weak. "I just sold my fuckin' Camaro for this."

"Well," Vinny said again. "Not to talk myself out of a job or nothin', but you aren't saving any money hiring me. Even with my family-friend discount."

"My wife used to do the books," I explained.

"I know."

"She's gone now. Took the kids and left. I'm not allowed to see 'em."

"I know, Ray."

The flies came down on my desk. I batted them away and they buzzed right back.

"Look, I gotta go think," I said.

"Yep."

Vinny hung up and I walked out of my office and through the kitchen. Kyle balled up a thick wad of dough and threw it at Chad. It bounced off with a solid thud and Chad spun around.

"Bro I will deadass fuck you up!" He laughed.

I ignored them and went up to the counter. A young couple was waiting there. "The fuck's it take to get some service in this place?" The guy said. His girlfriend elbowed him and shot him a glare.

I stepped to the register and took their order, thinking it was time to play the lottery. I had two lives that were both shit—those had to be some kind of odds.

"I don't want to endanger you," Dr. Rupert says.

I look into his strange eyes—one blue, one brown—and realize I have spent far more time hearing this man than seeing him. "You don't," I assure him. "Quite the contrary, in fact. Our arrangement is perfectly therapeutic."

He dips his head. The blinds behind his desk are open this time and I can see the rolling green of Central Park. His office smells like apples.

"Endorphins are therapeutic," he says. "I enjoy our time together much as you do. But I fear that if we neglect your condition we will only make it worse in the long run."

I lean back into the couch. "My good Doctor, are you suggesting that we terminate our arrangement?"

"No," he says quickly.

"Then what are you saying?"

He folds his hands over his desk and leans forward. "I am saying my concern for you has transcended the professional. It is now personal. I want to help you be well."

"But you do."

"We are distracted." He puts his hand on his heart and grins. "It is the most lovely possible distraction, but a distraction nonetheless. We need to tie these dreams of yours back to the trauma that caused them. Otherwise I am being wildly irresponsible with your psyche."

I look him over with a new heat. He must realize that his integrity and his genuine care for me makes him more attractive, not less. But that's not why he's doing it. His intentions are honest. I can tell; you learn a lot about a person when you allow them to know you.

Dr. Rupert is neither handsome nor ugly. Tall and thin; salt-and-pepper hairline, slightly receding; hawkish features; a somewhat delicate, yet highly sophisticated constitution. You wouldn't call him a model of manliness. But at this moment his sex appeal is in the stratosphere.

He notices the look in my eyes and grabs his notepad. "Right," he says, making his tone as analytical as possible. "Why don't you give me an overview of this situation with your dreams?"

"You want me to start from the beginning?" I ask.

"Just a general overview," he repeats. "As a refresher. They are sporadic, yes? They do not occur nightly?"

I sigh and close my eyes. "Correct."

"Give me a ballpark. How often would you say they occur?"

"Certainly no less than once a week. Often multiple times a week."

I hear him scribble in his notepad, though I don't know why. It isn't as if this information is new to him. I open my eyes again and giggle. There's an innocence to this formulaic display, despite the scandalous context.

"Come on." He suppresses a grin with serious effort and that only makes me laugh harder. "Damn it Roya, please! Just for now, be serious. We need to get this straight."

I clear my throat. "Sorry."

"Now," he says. "You always dream of the same man, yes?"

"I don't dream *of* him," I correct. "I *am* him. I live his actual life for a day, or a few days, or however much subjective time passes in that particular 'dream.' Eventually, I, as this man, go to bed, and when I wake up I'm me again. Dr. Roya Belford. In every dream I have access to his every thought and even his memories. It *feels* as though I've been him my entire life."

He taps his chin with his pen. "And in these dreams, as this man, you also remember being you? You remember being Roya?"

"Yes. But I can't remember informational details. Names, addresses, phone numbers, business names, even license plate numbers. None of that information sticks when I pass from life to life. It's like I'm bouncing back and forth between parallel universes, and I can't take any identifying information with me."

"Unsurprising," he nods. "When recalling dreams, your brain picks up only the 'gist.' The general unfoldment of events and things that occurred. Finer details are not as likely to be stored."

"You're preaching to the choir," I say. "Assuming these were normal dreams. But they aren't. How do you account for the amnesia? If I 'dream' that I am this pizza guy for three days, I come back to this life having completely forgotten everything I've done *here,* as Roya, for three days!"

He buries his face in his notepad, as if the answer were hidden inside. "Well," he mutters, squinting at the paper, "I'm still speculating about that."

"Me too, believe me. And I have this thought. I know it's a crazy thought, but I can't shake it. Sometimes I really think I *am* living both lives."

"Yes, it probably feels as real as anything."

I bring my legs up on the couch and hug my knees. "Nothing else makes sense. What could account for this? Why can I remember everything in this man's life so clearly, except for his names and numbers? I can *smell* the inside of his pizza shop. I hear the voices of the dumb college kids he hired. I remember their conversation like I just listened to it. I know everything that ever happened to this guy. I can see the faces of his wife and children. Well, ex-wife now…I can *feel* his devastation at the divorce, the loss of custody. It's *my* devastation. I'm living with it, right now as we speak."

He points his pen at me and even clicks it for emphasis. "But that right there is the key, I think. This

dream man's life is centered around the loss of his family. Just as your life has been, ever since your own tragedy."

I shake my head. "That's not it."

"I know it's difficult to acknowledge," he says. "But this is the connecting thread."

"Dr. Rupert—"

"When you are this man," he interrupts firmly, but not unkindly. "This nameless man…can you remember the accident? *Your* accident, as Roya Belford?"

I don't answer for a moment.

"Roya, please," he says gently. "I know it's hard to face this, but we need—"

"Yes. Yes, I remember it. But when I'm him…" I choke, disgusted by my own words. "When I'm him, I don't remember their names."

"I understand," he soothes. "But when you are dreaming, as this man, you remember the events? Even without the names, you remember what happened…?"

"Yes!" I wail. "I remember everything. The whole accident. I see my children pulled out of the car. I see their blood. I see them zipped up into their bodybags. I see it every fucking day, no matter which person I am. But when I'm him…*I can't remember their names!*"

I sob hysterically. Dr. Rupert comes around to the couch and holds me for the rest of the session.

I sat in my office and watched Kyle fumbling at the cash register during the lunch rush. I decided not to help. It was an exercise in character-building. The hot forge of suffering and all that. I figured I should keep an eye on Chad in the kitchen and make sure he didn't burn the place down, but at this point I hoped he would. My insurance hadn't run out yet.

A hand came up from the line of customers and seemed to be waving at me. The owner of the hand stepped out of line and I realized it was Vinny.

I got up and walked around the counter to see him. All the hungry customers glared at me like I was a war criminal.

I shook Vinny's hand. "I had to come get a calzone while I still can," he said.

Vinny was funny to look at. Short and squat. His head was bald and his face was wrinkled, like a mask that was too big and got squished together.

"Hope ya ain't holding your breath," I told him.

Vinny looked at Kyle sweating from the effort of counting change. "Eh," he grunted. "I got nowhere to be."

"Wanna sit and wait the line out?" I gestured at a table in the corner that wasn't much bigger than a pizza. We squeezed ourselves around it and sat down amidst all the chatter and murmuring and beeping and humming.

"Place is a fuckin' sauna," Vinny said. He took off his oversized glasses, rubbed his eyes and put them back on.

I shrugged. "Small space with a lot of ovens and body heat."

Vinny studied the line of customers. Occasionally they would glance at us and whisper violent fantasies to their companions. If they had thought to bring pitchforks, Vinny and I would have been impaled.

"Is it always this busy?" Vinny wondered.

"This time of day, sure."

"Christ. How did you fuck this up, then? The money should be pouring in."

"Life happens," I said.

Vinny laughed. "Life happens," he mocked. "What does that mean? Hookers and blow?"

"Inflation and divorce."

"Oh, inflation and divorce." He nodded and looked around. The line of customers was spilling out in our direction as people got their orders in and had to stand aside, waiting for their food. The mob crept closer and closer to us.

Vinny fidgeted with the salt and pepper shakers. "I'm gonna suffocate in here," he said. "This place is like a god damn coffin."

"Claustrophobic," I said.

"That's right. Look, maybe this is all, like, a blessing in disguise, ya know?"

"How do you figure?"

He moved the salt and pepper shakers around the table like a kid with toy cars. "Maybe you can do better. Maybe there's better things coming down the road."

I snorted. "Or maybe the road's a dead end."

Vinny poured some salt on my hand. I shook it off and swiped the rest off the table. "It will be a dead end," he said, "if you say it will be."

"Could use some help, Ray!" Chad yelled from the kitchen. Several of the customers gave me looks of violent agreement. I ignored everyone.

"Vinny," I said. "How do you know any of this is real?"

"Any of what?"

"This." I gestured at everything. "All of it. Us sitting here. The city outside. Any of it."

He looked around my little closet of a restaurant as if to verify its existence. "Well if this ain't real, then what is?"

I thought of my other life. That woman, that psychologist. Her—me—banging that other psychologist. I wished I could remember their names.

"Vinny," I whispered. He leaned in closer to hear me. "I think I'm somebody else."

"Ray," he whispered back. "You're depressed."

"Listen, I'm being serious here. I don't think I'm me. I don't think this is real."

Vinny pushed the salt and pepper shakers away, like he was suddenly disgusted by them. "They got a word for that in therapy," he said. "But I can't remember what it is. You need to talk to someone."

I shut up. No way in hell he'd believe me. We sat awhile longer and then I got up and made Vinny his calzone. I brought it out to him and wouldn't take his money. I let the rest of the customers wait. They all stared daggers at him as he left. Vinny smiled at the mob. "Life isn't fair," he announced happily.

I went back to my office. Someone shouted at my back: "Never coming here again!"

When I went to bed that night the world rippled and wavered, like it always did before a shift. My body was jelly. I saw colored stars and lights swirling around behind my eyes. It felt like the world became a wave—I was a current swishing back and forth for eternity. When I finally crashed onto shore, I woke up, and I was once again that lady psychologist.

I awaken in Dr. Rupert's bed. Oddly enough, this means our scandal is finished. We have consummated the end of our conflict of interest—our doctor-patient relationship.

I open my eyes and scan the room where this transitional ceremony took place. It's spacious, white with

morning sunlight. It's a bedroom of refinement—polished wooden floors and walls bejeweled with fine art. Our clothes are strewn about the place like hurricane debris. The only sound is the muffled symphony of Manhattan, droning on in its eternal way, eight stories below us.

I turn over. Rupert is already awake, gazing at me. I smile, run my fingers through his hair.

"You should take a taxi to work today," he says.

I snort. "Good morning to you too, Romeo."

He doesn't blink. "You always say you hate the subway."

"I do. Especially when you bring it up on a lovely morning."

He takes my hand out of his hair and kisses it. "Yet you still use it," he says.

I squint at him. "I genuinely can't tell if you're serious."

"I'm as serious as psychosis," he says without a trace of irony. "You've been in Manhattan for almost a year, Roya. You came all the way across the sea to live here so you wouldn't have to drive a car, or even be in one."

"Jesus," I sigh, rolling onto my back. "I thought I wasn't your patient anymore."

"You're my love," he says, as if that explains something.

"Babe, I'm not taking some jizz-stained taxi to my office."

He cups my face with a hand. "Then let me drive you."

"NO!!" I shout. Dr. Rupert pulls his hand back.

We're quiet for about ten minutes. I stare at his vaulted ceiling and he stares at me.

"Dr. Rupert," I say.

"I *insist* you don't call me that anymore," he laughs.

"Listen! Those dreams I came to see you about are not dreams. They're real."

"I know," he says tenderly. "It can be very—"

"No, god damn it, I don't need a lecture on the vividness of delusion. I know the literature as well as you do. I'm telling you, this is real. I am two people at once. It's been my entire life. This isn't some response to a five-year-old trauma."

He caresses my cheek with a finger, but he doesn't say anything.

I turn to face him again. "If we are going to be something," I tell him, "something *real*…something more than fun…I need you to believe this and understand it."

His face is puzzled, but not unkind. His blue eye is sad, but his brown one is curious. "Then why did you come to me?"

The question is so unexpected that I chuckle. "Because…I…what?"

He smiles. "If this is all real and not an enigma of your troubled psyche, why come to me? What could I hope to do about a metaphysical problem? I'm hardly qualified for such things."

I know I shouldn't be, but I'm mad at him. He's as warm and reasonable as you could ask him to be, but I'm furious.

"Fine," I say, rolling out of bed. "I'll go wave down a fucking taxi."

I was alone in the shop when it happened. Chad and Kyle had finally quit on me. No call, no show. News had gotten out that I would soon be closed down and business had ground down almost to nothing in a matter of days. Manhattan doesn't dwell on things. It moves on, faster than my ex-wife.

The sound of the street outside wafted through the open door. One of the lights above me flickered. I was passing time counting cash in the drawer. Then he walked in. *Him!* The doctor, the psychologist. The one I was fucking in my other life. He strolled right into my restaurant like it was nothing. I guess to him, it *was* nothing.

The wad of cash fell out of my hand and the fans blew the bills all over the place, like leaves in a storm.

"Oh my," the doctor said, admiring the spectacle. The flickering light danced in his eyes, one blue, one brown. Seeing that I made no move to try and catch my money, he frowned. "Would you like a hand? I know customers probably aren't allowed behind the counter, but…"

There was that voice. That calm, silky music. I knew it better than any song. But I'd never *met* him. What was his name? Why the fuck couldn't I remember?

I'd been staring at him this whole time, jaw dropped to the open register. He noticed my astonishment now and scowled, trying to account for it.

"What's your name?" I blurted.

His scowl deepened. It was dawning on him just how deranged I was. He glanced around the shop and stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. "Perhaps I've caught you at a bad time."

"Your *name,*" I repeated. "I know you. You're a psychologist."

"Ah," he said, inching back. "Are you a friend of one of my clients?"

I laughed at the absurdity of the question, and the even greater absurdity of its answer. This didn't make me look any less crazy.

The doctor glanced over his shoulder at the door. "Well," he said. "I should probably be—"

"Wait, please," I begged. I walked around the counter. "Look man, you're a doctor and you want to help people. I need your help. I need you to tell me your name."

He'd heard enough. He turned and made for the door, apologizing as he went. I dove after him and managed to swing the door shut before he could get out. He groped for the knob, but I snatched his arm back.

"Wait!" I cried.

The doctor glared at me. "Let go of me," he said in a measured tone. "And let me out of here."

"Not until you tell me your name. Please. I need to be one of your clients. My whole life I thought I was crazy until I met you just now."

His face curled with disgust, like I'd just confessed to love at first sight. He grabbed the doorknob with his other hand and tried to get out. I put my weight against the door. I'm a pretty stocky guy, and this doctor wasn't a physical type.

"Come on," he moaned, more scared than angry now.

"Look man, I'm not gonna hurt you. I just need to know your name. *Please.*"

He made another push for the door, face reddening. I wrapped him up in a bearhug and held him back. "Let me out!" He screamed, thrashing against me. "LET ME THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!"

"You're seeing someone," I yelled. "That lady, she's a psychologist like you. She's one of your clients and you're fucking her!"

He went limp. I let go of him and he staggered back toward the counter. He stared at me for a long minute. I stayed quiet, let him process things.

"How the hell would you know about that?" His voice had menace in it. I had struck some kind of nerve.

"Because," I said. "Everything she's telling you is real."

His eyes blazed. He came at me and shoved me up against the wall. I didn't resist. I figured it was a lot to take in. "Who are you? Who the *fuck* are you? What fucking game is this?"

"No game."

"No game?! She wouldn't do this to me. You and her are trying to play me. Is that it? Trying to get something out of me? She wouldn't. She wouldn't do that!" He sounded desperate, like he was yelling at himself more than me.

"You're right. She wouldn't. That's not what's going on."

"Then what?" His breath was hot against my nose.

"I just told you," I said calmly. "It's for real. The whole thing, everything she's said to you."

His brown eye twitched, his blue one bulged. He stepped back and watched me for a second. Then, he

pulled his keys out of his pocket and held them up. "I'll kill you," he murmured. "I'll do it. If you don't tell me what's going on here, I'll…" he took a breath. He shook his head, like a horse, then moved forward and put his car key against my neck. "I will cut your throat," he said, trying to sound more convincing than he did.

"No you won't," I laughed. "I know you."

He pressed the key harder into my skin, but drew no blood. "How?" He screamed. "How do you know Roya?!"

Immediately I gasped. The sound of her name—my name—felt like angels singing in heaven. The light of the next world had just spilled into my pizza shop, and all the mysteries of the universe were laid out in front of me.

That was it. *Roya.* Roya Belford. I remembered. That was me!

Tears poured down my face. I slid down against the wall to the floor, weeping with joy and hope, and I swear I could see that white light of heaven as I passed out.

I come back to myself—that is, myself as Roya—in the middle of a session with a client. A slightly overweight, middle-aged man named Ralph is on my couch, crying about his mother.

I excuse myself and run into my bathroom. It's attached directly to my office and I can hear Ralph sniveling on the other side of the door.

I call Dr. Rupert. It rings twice, then a third time, and I become afraid he won't answer. Is he strangling me?—my other me? Is he busy disposing of my body? The strangeness of this feeling can't be overstated. It's a kind of vicarious self-preservation, taken to absurd extremes.

But finally he picks up.

"Roya," he breathes, sounding truly exasperated.

"Dr. Rupert!" I hiss, trying to keep my voice down with Ralph outside. "Where are you? Have you left the shop?"

"So you know I'm at a shop. Tell me, has everything been a ploy?"

"No!" I moan, struggling to maintain a whisper. Ralph's sniffling goes quiet.

"Then what the good *fuck* is going on here, Roya? Who is this guy? Some old boyfriend of yours?"

"No," I say again. "Look, you're still there right? Don't go anywhere. Let me come to you."

"Where could I go?" Rupert laughs coldly. "This brute has collapsed in front of the door. I can't hope to move him. I'm trapped."

I can't tell if he's being facetious or not. "Okay," I say. "Just give me an address, darling. I'll be right there."

"Why?" He sneers. The venom in his voice, the bitter distrust, is enough to break my heart.

Ralph knocks on the bathroom door. "Doc?" He says. "Everything okay in there?"

"Just give me a minute, please," I call out.

"Who's this now?" Rupert asks. "Someone to break my kneecaps?"

"It's a *client,*" I snap. "Please, babe, this isn't a game. Just give me the address where you are. I'll come to you and we'll work this all out."

"Doc?" Ralph knocks again. "Are you sure—"

"Just a minute, please!" I shout.

"Fine," Rupert says. "You win. At this point I just want to know what the fuck this is about. If it means the end of my knees, then so be it. I'll text you the address. I'll be waiting."

"Thank you," I sigh with relief. "I'll be there soon. I promise, everything will be okay."

We hang up and I walk out of the bathroom. I realize my face is coated with tears. I wipe them away as Ralph stands over me. He looks at me the way you'd look at your sweet old nanny after hearing her drop an F-bomb.

"I apologize," I say, brushing past him. "An emergency has come up. I'll make sure you aren't charged for this session."

"But Doc," he begins to protest. I don't have time to listen. I rush out the door and to the elevator, abandoning Ralph just like his mother did.

Rupert's text comes through just as I get out onto the street. Of course. The address flashes on my phone like a childhood memory—an old friend you can't believe you've forgotten. *Of course.* That's *my* shop. Now that I see this address, it feels as familiar as my own name.

Ray's Pizza Parlor. Lower East Side of Manhattan, on the other side of the Park.

I watch the road and its endless stream of cars and buses and taxis. I lied to Rupert this morning. I didn't take a taxi to work. I intended to, but when the time came, I was too chickenshit.

I'm too chickenshit now as well. But the fastest way to the shop is to cut through Central Park, and the subways can't help me with that. So I take off my heels and run.

I jolted awake and sat up, back against the door. The doctor was sitting at one of my little tables, chin propped on his palm, listening to the sound of new rain picking up outside.

"Thank goodness, you're awake," he said, all sarcasm.

"Your name is Dr. Rupert," I answered, as happy as if I was announcing a pregnancy.

"Ah," he sighed, taking his arm down and folding his hands. "So you do know. At last, some honesty."

"I just remembered now. As soon as you said her name, things started to change. The shifts are happening more quickly. And I'm remembering. I think you've done your job, doctor."

He raised an eyebrow. "Job?"

"What's a therapist's job? You've cured us of our mental disease."

"I suppose you're referring to these delusions of living a double life. It doesn't sound to me like I've cured anything. At best, I've made it worse. At worst, I'm playing into whatever con this whole thing is about."

"You *know* they're not delusions," I told him. "That's why you got scared."

He straightened in his chair, puffing up with pride. "Scared?"

I nodded, unable to contain a smug grin. "When I asked for your name. I looked like a crazy person. But in your line of work, you oughta be more comfortable around crazy than most people. You wigged out because deep down you knew this was for real. And that scares you."

He scoffed. "Now *you're* a psychologist."

"I am," I laughed. "I spend half my time as one, over there with you on the West Side!" I continued laughing for a good minute. What else could I do? The

world was a carnival of weirdness and absurdity. No other response made sense. The light above my counter flickered more rapidly than usual, like it was putting an accent on my giggles.

Dr. Rupert got tired of it and stood up. "Look, it's just preposterous!" He yelled over my laughter. "Shut up!" I quieted down. "It's preposterous. If you two have been living each other's lives all this time, why did you never go looking for each other? You're both here, in the same city. I can't imagine it would be difficult to arrange, as you both ostensibly occupy each other's brains."

I shrugged. "All this time I figured I was crazy and that was it. Why would I try to meet up with a dream? I didn't think much else of it until you walked in the door."

The doctor pursed his lips. "And Roya?"

I took a breath, feeling a bit more sober again. "Roya's more curious. I mean, she's a god damn psychologist. She's thought about it a few times, trying to find me. But she always talks herself out of it, because she's afraid of what will happen."

Rupert nodded. Some of his tension seemed to lift. He sat back down at the table. "She was afraid she wouldn't find you," he confirmed, "and that would mean she's crazy."

"That," I said, "and what if she *did* find me? What the hell would happen? Would the universe explode?"

"I suppose we'll find out in a moment," Rupert said, coming back to his dry sarcasm.

I worked my way back to my feet and looked out the window. There was the city going by. A proper New York monsoon had started up. People and umbrellas were darting past the window - how many millions of lives were out there that I knew nothing about, and would never even catch a glimpse of again? I just had my two, which was more than most people had. All I shared with those swarms of humanity outside was a passing moment.

"It's kind of nerve-wracking," I said. "I feel like I'm about to meet a celebrity."

"It's impossible," Rupert said distantly, like he'd been sitting there trying to work it out in his head. "I mean, Roya says this dual-consciousness has gone on her entire life. How could that be? Which one of you is older? Surely one of you would have to have experienced a few early years of 'solitude,' so to speak."

"We were born on the same day, same year," I answered, still looking out the window. "Me in East Harlem, her in England. We're both forty-two. Maybe that has something to do with it, I don't know."

"Convenient," he muttered.

Then I saw her, running down the sidewalk with her shoes in her hands, like Satan himself was behind her. Her face was pale and youthful, stained with trails of mascara, her thick brunette hair a soaked and tangled

mess. As she got closer I could see the freckles dotting her face—my face. All the times I've looked in the mirror, as Roya, I've hated those freckles more than evil itself.

But now, seeing them with a different set of eyes, all I could think was that I had never seen a more beautiful human being.

The door to the shop opens just as I'm about to plow it off the hinges. I barrel inside, dripping and panting. Wiping strands of soaked hair out of my eyes, I see a burly, clean-cut, olive-skinned gentleman holding the door with tears on his cheeks. The hair on his head has mostly grayed, yet his trimmed beard is all black. Gravity yanks my shoes out of my hands. I lean against a small table and nearly topple it, close to fainting. Ray lunges over and steadies me, and I throw my arms around him, laughing like a child.

"You're real! You're really…" I cough, feeling lightheaded.

"We're not crazy," he laughs with me. "And all because your therapist had a craving for pizza."

I look up at him, halfway between a stroke and euphoria. Seeing his face in anything but a mirror is a transference of impossible magnitude. The word "surreal" doesn't cut it. What was a dream is now a relationship, and a deeper one than any human has ever known. Every secret behind his eyes is also behind mine. Every memory

he cherishes, buries, cringes at, laughs or cries over, I have lived all the same. We have stumbled upon a new dimension of honesty, one previously impossible for even the most well-intentioned of people. There is absolutely nothing we could hide from each other, even if we wanted to.

If he were some stranger, this would be terrifying. But he's me. I'm him. It no longer makes sense to think of us as two different people. We are the same self in two bodies.

Dr. Rupert's hand appears on my shoulder. I barely notice it.

"Roya," he murmurs. "You should sit down. You're going to pass out."

He and Ray guide me into one of the chairs at this little table I almost capsized. "I'm fine," I assure them. "I just need a minute. I mean, my god."

The two of them encircle the tiny table, looking down at me. What a contrast. Ray is still glowing, weeping, grinning. But Rupert is withdrawn. The sterile, flickering light of the shop brings out lines under his frown, making him look older, more exhausted. It's strange how small my love for Dr. Rupert seems now. It isn't any smaller than it ever was, but no matter how close he and I become, it will always pale in comparison to the closeness I feel with my other me. How could it ever measure up? What love could? Can I even call this love?

These words we take for granted—love, self, relationship, I, we—all need new definitions now.

I wonder if Rupert can sense this. Whether he believes in all this or not, it's clear to him that I do.

I take his hand, ready to offer some word of encouragement, some comfort. But I can't find any. There are none. I'm reduced to petting his hand in silence. There are no promises I can make him, good or bad. I don't know what any of this means or where it will lead.

A man walks into the shop, shaking raindrops from his hair. On the way in, he kicks one of my fallen shoes by accident. The heel thunks across the floor in a satisfying, percussive way. The guy looks down at his own shoes, then at all of us, gathered around this table like some kind of cultish ceremony.

"Uh. Hello?" He ventures.

He looks like a younger version of Ray. He's thinner and clean-shaven, but he has the same even brow, the same tanned complexion, the same sardonic glint in the eyes.

I recognize him just as Ray does. It's Benjamin Franklin—the guy who bought his (our) Camaro.

"Ayy!" Ray booms. He steps over to Ben Franklin and gives him an enthusiastic handshake. "So, you came to get that calzone after all, did ya?"

Ben Franklin grins, taken aback at Ray's exuberance, but not unamused.

"Yeah, well, my buddy told me you were closing down. I got scared I was running out of time."

Ray claps him on the back like a used car salesman. "Your buddy tells the truth. But that's all right. Things have a way of working out. Hey! Did you bring her with you?" Ray cranes his neck around, trying to see the road outside.

"Sure did," says Ben Franklin. "You want to say hi?"

Ray puts a hand on his heart and swoons. "More than you can know. In fact, I'll make you a deal. You let me take her around the block once, and you get a free meal."

Ben Franklin gleams and hands Ray his keys. "Don't mind if I do."

Ray rattles the keys in my direction. "Time to get back on the horse, you. Let's go, little lady!" As he trots outside, he calls over his shoulder, "hold down the fort, Franklin!"

I laugh and get up to follow him. Rupert gives me a look of agony.

"I'll be right back," I promise him. "We're just going around the block." I hesitate and fluff his hair. "Okay?"

"Go ahead," he relents, half-smiling. "I'm just happy you're getting into a car."

I give him a quick kiss and run outside, brushing past a dazed Ben Franklin, who probably assumed he would be Ray's passenger.

The Camaro isn't far up the street, red paint glossed and shining in the rain. Ray is standing on the passenger's side, waiting, beaming as if it isn't a downpour. He tosses me the keys and we hop inside, me in the driver's seat. As we close the doors the abrasive hiss of the rain becomes a hypnotic patter.

It's odd, sitting behind this steering wheel, in this body. I feel too small for it, my legs stretching too far to the pedals. But it's as familiar as childhood. I have twenty years of memories in this car I've never seen.

Ray laughs, watching me take all this in. "Wanna know something funny?" He asks. "I saw something of myself in that kid when he bought this from me. I was close to his age when I bought it. I was new hot shit with my new classic car. When I gave Ben Franklin the keys, I was thinking I had been in his shoes. That I was living his moment over again. Vicarious-like!" His last words are broken up by a howling giggle. A deep belly-laugh he hasn't experienced since he was married.

I put the keys in the ignition and the car roars to life, growling beneath me. I tell Ray, "I remember."

Thirty Legs

The demon arrived all at once, with no buildup. It smeared itself over the walls and ceiling like a blob of black ink. The air in Raven Firth's little apartment was electrified. The stench of sulfur made her cough. She shivered, both from the drop in temperature and from the icy tendrils of shadow that slithered out from the demon and wrapped her up. Somehow she tasted rotting meat. She gagged and swallowed her vomit.

Raven took a moment to sputter and gulp. Once she could speak, she bent to her knee and intoned: "Beelzebub! Lord of the flies, prince of shadow. I come to you a lowly maggot, and ask for your guidance."

The formless black of Beelzebub took the shape of two great, veiny wings that stretched from floor to ceiling. They passed over the candles—arrayed in a pentagram over the floor—and snuffed them out.

For a moment, darkness was total. Then, a sphere of eyes appeared in the center of the demon. Each of them glowed like miniature moons. They chased each other in endless circles between Beelzebub's wings, dozens of them, and their mad orbit threw a dance of pale white light over the room.

Raven gasped at the terror and beauty of it all, her breath visible. The eyes glared at her as they revolved, drawing her in. They were lidless, colorless—infinite black abysses surrounded by moonlight. If she let them, they would drag her soul into some pit of eternity, some screaming underworld that she could never escape from.

She forced herself to look away from them, focusing her attention on the thin trails of smoke rising from her blown out candles. The wood floor was rough on her bare knee, but she welcomed the pain as a distraction.

"What do you seek, child?" Beelzebub's voice was like the buzz of some vermin's wings, a whisper in a cloud of locusts. It didn't come from his location in the room, or from any location. It was a sourceless presence welling up from the depths of Raven herself.

She took a shaky breath. "Vengeance." She visualized her target in her mind, saw him turn slowly from a man into a squirming white pupa.

Beelzebub laughed, a sound like a swarm of bees blasted with fire. "The maggot would bring her lover down to her level? She would make him a maggot in her image?"

Raven quickly batted down a surge of anger. If she let the demon goad her, it would gain control of her. The reverse, of course, was the goal here.

"He is one already," she spat. "He is filth. I want him to see himself for what he is, to be unable to deny it."

Beelzebub laughed again, so loudly it made Raven hiss in pain. She covered her ears, though it was useless to do so.

"If you would condemn one to low places," the demon declared, "you must first walk them yourself."

Then, in an instant, Beelzebub was gone. The apartment was dark and silent. There was a general charge to the atmosphere, a residual pressure, but this faded quickly as the room warmed up again.

"What the fuck?" Raven asked her empty home. "Hey! What the fuck?"

She thought about trying to re-summon the demon to demand clarification. Or maybe some kind of spiritual refund. But she fell as she tried to stand, suddenly overcome with exhaustion so deep that even thought was an impossible burden. A distant, foggy notion came over her that she should crawl to

bed, but she was unconscious before she could twitch a finger.

The first thing Raven noticed when she awoke was her legs. She had thirty of them—fifteen pairs. After that, she didn't notice "things." Her perception was consumed by vibration—the world was an endless, raging sea of it, each wave distinct in its size and character—and *smell.* Beings and objects no longer "had" scents; they *were* scents. Smell was as tangible and solid as "matter" had been before.

Before what? Raven wiggled her antennae, and from these tiny movements a new tsunami of smells washed over her. Something was wrong. She shouldn't have had antennae, and she definitely should not have had thirty legs. She tried to look around, but vision didn't mean as much to her as it used to. It was lower resolution—mostly an interplay of light and shadow. There were vague and blurry shapes, but not much else.

This wasn't a tragedy. You didn't need sight when smell told you so much. Pulses of vibration coursed through each of her legs, though the intensity varied with each limb. It was all about the distance

from the leg to the source of the vibration; the angle; the location and momentum of the vibration in relation to the points of her thirty feet.

By all this, Raven judged that a spider about her size—maybe a little smaller—was crawling below the other end of the TV stand. Not that she knew what a "TV" was, or could form any concept relating to "stand." To her these were just surfaces, obstructions—things to be traversed or circumnavigated.

Raven herself was curled up in one of the corners, right where the leg of the stand met the floor. With a slight quiver of her left antenna, her mind was jabbed with the sharp needle of the spider's pheromones. It was working on a new web. Each secretion of silk ignited a fresh spark of acrid stench. Raven, as a human, would have compared this to a whiff of some extremely spicy herb. Something that would have made her eyes water and her nose run, having inhaled it from too close on.

But in her current form, it wasn't as unpleasant as all that. It was delicious. It was the smell of a banquet meal to an empty stomach. The instinct to chase it would normally have been irresistible. The

only thing that stopped her from acting on it now was the odd existential *itch* she felt—a realization of *wrongness* growing in the back of her mind. Reality had taken a bad turn, somehow. She wasn't supposed to be this. What happened?

Before she could work this out, the vibrations of the spider shifted. Its smell grew more sour, less metallic. It had ventured a few steps from its corner. Now it was close enough for Raven to smell the sweet, seductive oils coating its exoskeleton. Her juicy feast was in range, and in her thirst, there was no time for concerns about her existence. Eons of evolutionary instinct screamed at her to pounce; she was too near to her prey, and too fast for it to escape.

She rocketed toward it. Her legs were a rapid-fire orchestra. Their smooth harmony propelled her so fast that it felt like flight. If she had been human, she would have laughed from pure exhilaration. She was a living roller-coaster.

The spider sensed her baring down on it and tried to dart away, out into the open air of the living room. But it was hopeless. Raven was on it in less than a second. She crashed into it and knocked it on its side. Her backside coiled around the spider's body.

Every one of her legs drummed against its soft, moist form, wearing down its defenses. The legs of the spider kicked helplessly and twitched in agony as Raven sunk her forcipules into its back. The spider's blood and other fluids seeped into her mouth and flowed over her forcipules like a gentle massage. Raven moaned internally with ecstasy. Her pleasure pulsed in several rapid bursts before exploding in a feeling that reminded her of orgasm. Venom ejaculated from her forcipules and into the open wound of the spider.

In her mind, she screamed with delight. But the delight quickly turned to horror as she realized what she was doing, and thereby what she was. As the venom took effect and the spider's desperate fighting lulled, the hold her new instincts had on her lessened. A ghost of reflective, human thought returned to Raven, and through it, horror evolved into despair; disgust; delirium.

Her body remained on autopilot and began its feast. The meat of the spider was still delicious—the unborn eggs it carried were a delicacy, like a fine and rare sauce. But Raven couldn't stand her own enjoyment of it. Her worm-like frame unwrapped

itself from the spider and she studied it—felt the blood and euphoria of victory running through it. Her antennae jiggled, savoring the aroma of the spider's open innards.

She couldn't form words yet—couldn't even remember what they were. But if she could have, her entire sense of self would have been reduced to one: *no.*

Everything the word did or could signify—revulsion; grief; rejection of being itself—this was how she now defined herself. It was all she had left. If she went any further than *no,* than the negation of what was, she would be left with a truth she knew would shatter her—that she had become Vermin itself.

She had become a centipede.

It was a long night for Raven. Her self-awareness continued to expand, but she didn't gain any autonomy. The instincts of the centipede retained total control. All she could do was watch. And *taste.* And *feel.* Most of the night was spent eating the spider, with intermittent breaks spent wandering the dusty floor beneath the TV stand. A few intriguing vibrations caught her attention—there may have been

a couple silverfish scuttling on the other side of the room—but she wasn't hungry enough to do anything about them.

Eventually, morning brightened the edges of the floor outside the stand, like the coming of a tide. It brought a sluggish warmth to all of her legs. Between that and her full belly, it was a relief to give in to sleep.

But just as she began to doze, a massive vibration startled her. The entire TV stand was jostled by some quake, some shift of weight. Following a new trail of scent, Raven looked outside and saw a gigantic form rising. The sun had turned the apartment into a formless blaze of light, but here was a shadow of cosmic proportions, growing so tall that Raven wondered if it would ever end.

Its movement unleashed a torrent of oppressive smells. Most of these, Raven realized, had been there all along, but had been so ambient and unchanging that they escaped notice. Whatever this thing was, it was undeniably, enormously alive.

It made a sound that shook the universe, and this sound created a new storm of stench. The smell was like a mountain of dead things, prey that had

been eaten and coughed up. With that, the colossus stepped across the room, each footfall a new shockwave over the floor, the TV stand, the world as Raven knew it. Her impression, as she watched, made for an interesting dichotomy. Her centipede instincts regarded the monster simply as a thing to avoid. It was a mass of uncertainty and unnatural smells, and this was a recipe for fear.

But Raven's human side was overcome with awe. Was this what it was like to look upon a god? What other being could make her feel so small and powerless?

The great beast let out another air-shattering heave and collapsed on a huge mass of darkness that sat opposite the TV stand—something even larger than the beast itself, though decidedly non-living. It never moved and barely smelled. A human would have called it a "couch," but Raven didn't remember that.

Raven felt a subtle surge beneath her with the impact; if she'd been lighter, it would have launched her skyward. After that, the beast was still. It only took a few minutes of quiet for her centipede brain to

lose interest and surrender again to the heavy sleep her feast had made possible.

But Raven clung to the non-sight of the creature as she drifted off. Somehow this being, this colossus, meant everything to her. Like all good deities, it was the most terrifying thing she could imagine, and yet the most hopeful. It represented all possibilities, grotesque and beautiful. It was the only thing grand enough to transcend her insect mind; awesome enough to encourage her humanity. All of these were concepts she only dimly remembered, but the impulse to grow, to become more, to grope upward in the direction of some heaven…it was there, and it made her feel, in at least a minuscule way, human.

She reached for this feeling as she fell into dreams of dark, dripping places, the tearing of exoskeletons and the swallowing of limbs.

Raven woke up at dusk. The beast had gotten more active during the day. It moved around its nest with the strange slowness that was typical of giant things. Often it would disappear around the corner for a time, before returning to its favorite place across from

the TV stand, where Raven could watch it and sniff in its general direction.

Around sundown, the beast moved off to that place around the corner. There was a sudden rush of cool air and an influx of new smells. The world quaked with new vigor. Raven, having digested her meal in her rest, was fresh and alert. Curiosity had the freedom and energy to take hold of both her insect mind and the germ of human thought that had become her norm.

She journeyed across the dank, unkempt landscape that was her home, and all the way to the back wall that this TV stand sat against. She trudged over clumps of dust and human hair that were like steep, unsteady hills. When she reached the wall she climbed it. There was a thrill to this; she rose higher and higher, like walking up the side of a skyscraper. Though, that may have just been a projection of humanity. For the centipede, there wasn't much to be thrilled by. To scale a wall was just to wander a forest of intermingling smells amidst the incoherent dance of light and shadow, same as anything else. To walk the ceiling would have been equally unremarkable.

So Raven took this little squirt of childlike excitement as a win. Eventually she reached a height where she could peek over the edge of the television screen. Just as she did, the beast re-entered the room with a second, even larger being. The atmosphere quivered as they threw rapid clicks and drones of noise at each other. Raven found these fascinating—there was something oddly familiar about them. The sounds escalated into an outpouring of acidic smells. They reminded her of the pheromones of some of her prey, only far stronger. Almost unbearably so.

The two god-beings entangled themselves in each other, their darknesses blending together. Bits of thin, billowy shadow fell from them. Were they shedding their skins? That didn't seem right, but Raven couldn't imagine what else might have been happening.

They fell together onto the couch-blob and writhed. The sounds they made grew harsher as they melded more and more into one mass. Raven's antennae itched as the stench of the gods' pheromones became a cloud that filled the room. It was hard for Raven to tell how long this odd ritual went on—even if she had remembered the concept of

time, her perception of it was totally out of whack. At some point though, the beasts cried out in unison and released an explosion of new stench. What had been a smoky, drifting odor became a harsh, burning oppression. It seemed to be everywhere at once. Raven retreated downward, back under the TV stand. This helped only slightly.

But if the initial stream of scents had been a long, dim burn, this last one was a short, bright blaze. It faded quickly, and Raven's senses cleared up again. The beasts had stopped moving, and communicated now with low, murmuring vibrations. Raven listened to these with appropriate rapture. When gods speak, Raven figured, you pay attention, whether or not you understand.

For a long time, she didn't understand. But as her legs grew more acquainted with the reverberations of their talk against the floor, seeds of meaning popped in her mind. Certain hums and buzzes in the gods' conversation would repeat, and with each repetition Raven felt a needle prick of ancient memory. One of them finally flashed in her eyes, gleaming and brilliant like a religious vision: *THE.*

"The…" the! That was a word! Raven remembered. Humans spoke with words! She had once used words!

Having remembered one, new words came more easily for her. She crouched down, pressing her long, slender belly against the gritty floor, savoring every vibration of phrase. *He…she…was…is…ate…alive…fuck…will…see…*

Language…this was language, that quintessentially human tool. And Raven was regaining it. She arched upward and jiggled her first few rows of legs, unable to contain her excitement. This was another victory in itself, having asserted such direct control over the centipede's body.

She bathed in relief and delight the rest of the evening, until hunger came. Hunger weakened her human will, and strengthened the drive of the insect. She knew that soon, she would have to give in and hunt.

But she didn't despair. Today was a day of progress. Today she evolved.

By the time the gods fell silent, Raven had managed to piece together what could have been called a "train of thought." It went something like this: *Betrayed me…*

let's fuck again…make him watch…make him see…make him feel what I feel…

A flood of light blinded Raven while she was hunting. The gods had been silent on their couch for hours. Everything had been dark. One of them must have gotten up to use the bathroom, a concept Raven was proud to have remembered.

A few seconds after the flash of light, there was a harsh screech. Raven's antennae recoiled. A tsunami of unpleasant smells pummeled her, and she fled. She didn't have to think about it. Her body flooded with danger signals, and ancient wisdom made her run.

She darted across the wall, which provoked another shriek from the angry god. She'd been right in the middle of this wall when the light came on, as exposed as she could have been. The god hurled a solid black mass at her and she arced down to the floor, barely dodging it. Once again the beast screamed, this time with a word: "Fucker!"

She made it to the floor, which was bubbling with vibrations. The second god had gotten up now. Raven heard it speak and strained to decipher the words as she rounded a corner.

"What the—happening—why are—?"

"Fucking centipede—the wall—threw my—fucker ran."

The gods followed her around the corner. She was still sprinting, all thirty legs firing, burning.

"There!" Said the second god. Its voice was deeper than its companion, its vibrations longer, more drawn out.

They launched another deadly projectile at Raven, which crashed just behind her like an asteroid. There was a thin, dark opening ahead. If she reached it, she would be safe. But her legs were exhausted. She was starving now, dry with thirst.

"God damn—" cried the first god, the one who lived here. "Hate—fucking *bugs!*"

Finally, Raven reached the gap and dove in. It was a beautiful place, dark and moist. And, it turned out, the gods had favored her in the end—there was food here.

As Raven barreled inside, she surprised three silverfish who were staying in this cavern, munching on crumbs that had puttered into it long ago.

They ran, shooting for the far end of the place, where it was darkest. But Raven pounced on the

nearest one and stabbed her forcipules deep into its back. It twitched and seized, and then grew still as Raven's venom seeped inside.

Trusting her venom to subdue her prey, she jumped off, hoping to catch at least one of the others. Her exhilaration at this unexpected buffet had restored some of the energy she lost running from the gods.

She chased down the slower of the two and caught it easily. This one she wrapped up with her lower half and held down so she could eat it fresh. It convulsed in manic agony as she bit into its back, breaking its outer shell and chomping down on its warm, juicy insides.

The euphoria of a successful hunt consumed most of Raven's senses, but with a dim spark of human thought, she listened for the speech of the gods.

She heard the one with the lighter voice say: "Have to move out—cannot live with—piece of worthless—under my—*fucking fridge!*"

Raven was chewing on an eyeball when the next attack came. A long, flat object swung in from outside

and swept her up. It dragged her, along with the half-eaten carcass of the silverfish and other random debris, toward the light. Raven climbed atop the thing and down the other side of it. She turned and saw it capture the uneaten silverfish too, the one she'd poisoned. It brought everything out into the apartment.

The god growled in disgust and anger as it looked upon its haul. Something flat and porous came down hard and crushed the uneaten silverfish. Then it was all swiped away, and Raven could see nothing but light.

After another second, the flat weapon slid toward her again. She retreated to the back wall where it couldn't reach, then sat there and watched.

The object displayed a pattern. It would lash in from the opening, twist and slide around a bit, and then sweep outside again. After a few iterations of this, the god screamed. That terrified Raven. It was a deafening, powerful sound.

The second god appeared and admonished the first. "Calm down," it said. "It's just—bug. It—hurt anyone."

"Don't tell me—calm down. I hate—damn bugs."

"But—kill other bugs. It—help out."

"You sound—psychopath."

"It's not—big deal."

For some reason that comment infuriated the first god. She pounded the floor, which felt like an explosion beneath the earth.

"It's—big deal—to *me!* Selfish—prick."

"Okay, who's—psychopath?"

"I let—stay in my—god damn—my *home*—don't start acting like *him.*"

"Is all—want from me—to do with him? I'm not—anti-ex—sign up for that."

Their voices reminded Raven of storms. Even her insect-mind had heard thunder, though it couldn't have comprehended it. Each wave of anger got more ferocious. The vibrations of their wrath made Raven want to inch away, but she was already tight against the wall.

"Didn't sign—shit!" The first god said. "Didn't make—fucking contract. What are—lawyers?"

"Okay," the second replied. The floor rumbled with the rhythm of the god's march.

"Where the—going?" The first god shrieked.

"Leaving—nuthouse—fucking—wannabe witch."

"Just like—him! You're just—him you lying—shit!"

"Raven," the second god bellowed. "You're insane."

At the sound of her name, the world bent and cracked. Of course. She was *Raven.* Raven Firth! That was her name. She *had* a name! She knew what names were. It was so obvious now, just from hearing it. It was so natural, matter-of-fact. How could she have forgotten? She wasn't a centipede. She was out there, in the apartment. She was a goddess.

A change in air pressure itched up her legs. New smells wafted in—rain, mud, some flowers on a balcony. For a split second, her vision changed. She saw flashes of color, the art and details of the stains and blobs on the floor. But it was over before she could celebrate.

"Eat a dick and die!" She heard herself yell, now with perfect clarity. "Suck a fucking horsecock! I'll *bury* you!"

Another explosion rattled the world, and Raven knew, somehow, that the front door had slammed. And the angry goddess continued screaming at it.

"I'll curse your whole family, motherfucker! I'll condemn you! You're a worm! I'll *make* you a worm!"

The fight with her boy-toy had made god-Raven sullen. After a brief hurricane of a tantrum, she plodded into the living room and was quiet.

Raven the centipede sat still beneath the refrigerator and pondered. The fact that she could ponder under such circumstances proved how far she had come since she awoke in the body of Vermin. That last silverfish was still around, hiding in some tiny crevice behind the countertops. The goddess had already swept away the other one she'd planned to eat, and she had feelings about this—primitive, territorial pangs that could have compared to anger. Her instincts told her there was nothing to ponder. There was prey nearby. A feast to replace the one she'd lost. You didn't neglect that for anything, least of all lofty thoughts about the nature of Being and your place in it.

But *she* was outside. The *real* her. If she could find some way to communicate, maybe that would end this nightmare. The nightmare needed to end soon, because it was actually beginning to seem not quite so nightmarish. Raven was getting used to it. To sprint on thirty legs was the most *alive* thing she had ever done, whether it was to flee from death or to chase a new meal. And what meals they were…no banquet had ever been so satisfying, so exhilaratingly tasteful as a fresh catch, as the taste of warm blood and still-living meat.

If she didn't get out of this soon, she would start to like it. And she could imagine no greater Hell than to live as a grimy, putrid bug and *enjoy* it. Everything about herself that mattered to her rebelled against the idea.

Her hunger for that silverfish was carnal. It was like all the most consuming human cravings combined—thirst, starvation, and sexual release. The power of all these impulses compelled her, as one, to hunt.

Asserting her will over such urges was like fighting a dragon. But she took a step forward. With heroic mental effort she forced the dragon down and

crawled out from beneath the refrigerator. Light from the apartment washed over her, which only made the dark cavern she had emerged from all the more inviting. Heaven was back there, in the blackness. Every pleasure imaginable was hiding in the places that larger beings neglected. And she was walking away from them.

The scents of so huge a creature as the goddess were volcanic. She was a teeming mass of biological systems, each with their own distinct odors—breath, flatulence, body oils, saliva, genital discharges, and countless others. They were overwhelming to Raven, but it made it easy not to get lost. She followed the wall of stench back to the living room, and from there to the wall where she'd started, where the TV stand sat.

The dragon pulled at Raven, as if it had been tied to her with chains. She strained against its weight and climbed the wall. If she'd had a voice, the effort would have made her scream. To make one step was like dragging a boulder. And she had thirty legs.

But she made it. She rose over the event horizon of the television and looked upon the world from on high. There was the goddess, a great blob of

stinking shadow, watching from her throne with rage that Raven could feel.

The goddess gave one of her screeching howls and jumped up. She picked up one of the many dark, barely-smelling shapes that comprised the room and stomped toward Raven. The vibrations of her steps battered the wall and threatened to throw Raven off.

She held on with all thirty feet and reached toward the goddess with her antennae, making a desperate plea with them. The goddess only needed to hear her; to see some sign of herself in Raven's hideousness. All she needed was a hint of the message; a faint whiff of their commonality, and Raven would be free. She felt this. She *knew* it.

She waved her antennae at the goddess. But the goddess didn't care. She saw no signs, heard no messages, smelled nothing at all. Raven had only a few seconds to realize her failure, and was too exhausted now to run.

The goddess swung her weapon. It came slowly, mightily, like a moon growing in the sky before colliding with its planet. Raven watched it and felt nothing, having spent everything.

When it hit, she felt no pain. There was only a sudden, glorious light, brighter than the sun, and a sound like thunder stretched and merged with the rolling of waves.

The first thing Raven noticed when she awoke was her legs. There were only two. She bolted upright and immediately winced; her entire right side ached, as if she'd lain on it all night without rolling over.

This pain was a blessing, though. The skin on her right arm was red and painted with the patterns of the floor grains. But it was *human* skin. It was a human arm. She crossed her arms over her chest and moved her hands up and down, from the elbow to the wrist, savoring the feel of her palms against them. All the mundane things in her apartment, once so familiar that she barely perceived them, were now sublime works of art. The morning sun beamed through the glass door that led to her balcony, warm and gentle. Outside, she could see trees and their leaves dancing in the wind. Smell had taken the back seat of her perception, where it belonged, and that made it enjoyable again. Even the faint lingering odor of all her snuffed candles brought tears to her eyes.

She looked at the clock and it dawned on her. 6:00 AM. She had summoned Beezlebub at midnight. If she was still on the floor, and could still smell the candles, that meant she had only been "out" for six hours.

But she had spent at least two days as a centipede. And it was real. She knew it hadn't been a dream. She could still taste the flesh she had eaten, could almost still feel her thirty legs skittering over the floor. Beezlebub had made her a bug. The experience had been more real than her human life, and Raven could imagine no better qualification for a "true happening" than that.

She stood up slowly, working cramps out of her legs. There was no sense, she figured, in getting tangled by questions about the *nature* of what had happened. Being a witch, she knew better than most that the mysteries of consciousness were deeper than human comprehension, and deeper than time. She allowed herself to cry, in relief and joy, and she was grateful to cry.

It was over. Nothing else needed to be said or pondered.

Trent pounded on the front door. Raven opened it and was disappointed. He was fatter than he'd looked in his profile picture, and his hairline had receded since it had been taken. Evening air blew in from behind him and carried a whiff of sweat with it.

He held up a bottle of whiskey and wiggled his eyebrows. "Are you ready to get down with it?" He asked.

Raven blinked. "Down with what?"

Trent ran his eyes over her. His head looked shrunken, like it had been compressed during birth. He tried to compensate for it with a fluffy beard, but it didn't work. "*It*," he winked.

Raven rolled her eyes. "Let's just get this over with."

She let him in and shut the door behind him. The thought of drinking his liquor made her nauseous. She took it from him and set it down by the door, then undid his belt.

"How come you didn't film it?" Trent asked. They were on the couch, and he had her wrapped in his hairy arms, pressed against his gross body. Raven looked away from him, focusing on a round, craggy

dent in the wall above the couch. She'd punched that wall a few months back and left the wound untended. The pink glow from her LED lights made it seem fleshy, if you looked at it right—like some saggy, decaying elbow skin.

"I don't know," she sighed.

"I thought the whole point was to film it."

"Yeah. It was."

"I thought you wanted to send it to that guy."

"I know what I wanted to do," she snapped.

He stroked her black hair, ran his finger down a streak of artificial white. "So why didn't you?"

She smacked his hand away. "I didn't feel like it."

He tried to lean in for a kiss, tried to be tender. Raven groaned and rolled over him and off the couch.

"Well, you sure as hell felt like it yesterday. I've never seen such thirsty texts."

Raven glanced at him from the side of her eye, then fished for her clothes and started to dress. "I feel sick," she said. "Do you mind taking off?"

Trent scoffed. "Oh, that's it? What the fuck. I feel like I have been very gentlemanly here."

She found his jeans and threw them at him. They landed over his face. He sat that way for a few seconds. When he peeled them off he glared at her.

"Thank you," Raven said, pulling her shirt over her head, "for being such a gentleman and respecting my wishes."

Trent got up and dressed. He didn't speak and didn't look at Raven. As he stomped out the door he grabbed his bottle.

"I'm not wasting my whisky on mediocre cunt." He slammed the door and left.

Raven had put gruesome curses on people for tamer comments than that. But now she felt nothing.

She sauntered over to her kitchen table—a small, black rectangle covered with sigils, totems, and old tarot cards. The cards were all face down. She picked one up and chuckled. The death card. A skeletal reaper raised a scythe to her, as if in toast.

She let the card flutter back down to the tabletop. Yesterday, she would have thought it meant something.

Raven felt an odd urge to look in a mirror. She turned for the bathroom and froze. There was something on the wall. Long, dark, and spindly.

No way. There was no fucking way.

But it was. She stepped closer and studied the creature. Those hideous legs, looking almost like tufts of spiky hair running the length of the body, left no room for doubt. She was staring at a centipede, and it was staring back. Two stringy antennae waved at her. Had they not, she wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between the head and the tail.

She wanted to be disgusted, but she couldn't summon it. There was a dull void where all her rage used to be. Without it, she didn't know what to do with herself. It had been fuel. What was she supposed to do now? Just *allow* the centipede to exist? In her own home?

But she felt nothing. These were contrived thoughts, born of habit, not emotion. The motivation to destroy was a memory. A dream. The centipede waited there, on the wall, waving those antennae as if to tempt her to violence.

Raven shook her head. "Fuck it," she muttered.

She went to the bathroom and had her look in the mirror. A ghostly pale woman of twenty-six peered back at her, hair dyed black with wisps of white. She flipped on the light and gazed at her eyes.

They were almost as dark as her hair, as they had always been. But something else had changed in them. Though they had aged since she last saw them, they were somehow more innocent. They were sharper, clearer. Unclouded. They *saw* what they were looking at, rather than attacking. They scanned the world and left it alone.

Raven shut off the light and went back to the living room. The centipede was gone. No doubt, it was crawling around in some lightless place that Raven never dusted. It would find some other hidden, creeping thing and kill it. There would be a gory feast.

Raven looked through her glass door, out over her balcony and into the woods. The sun had sunk below the trees.

Dopamine Dead

“Has anyone ever been outside?” Tej asks. He watches a never-ending swarm of drones buzz by his window. He’s been sitting here for all of three minutes and has already seen thousands. They stream through a maze of alleys and corners and the space between skyscrapers, and endless waves of new ones emerge from old subways and manholes. None moves in precisely the same direction as another. There’s no order to it. Tej can’t believe that none of them crash. Some are as small as his thumb, others larger than his apartment. They come in as many different shapes as there are shapes, and every color that has a name can be found among them. A few are even transparent, and most that are big enough have screens flashing advertisements. All are carrying some package or parcel or envelope.

Tej is thrilled to catch one making a delivery to an apartment window a few stories below him. After dropping its loot, it rises to Tej’s window and crosses slowly, rolling an

advertisement that says: *Cybernetic penile enhancement on a UBI budget…it's now a hard fact.* Below these bright yellow words is the face of a beautiful dark-skinned woman, mouth and eyes widening in delighted shock at some unseen enormity. Her dawning amazement is a three-second video loop that repeats indefinitely, an effect that Tej finds both jarring and entrancing.

Net laughs at his question from the other side of the room, the way you laugh at the strange, random things a toddler says. "Of course," she tells him. "*You've* been outside."

"Yeah, like twice. Moving from my parents' apartment to this one. I went outside to get from there to here. I think that's about it. I'm talking recently. Do people still go out there? Consistently?"

Tej sees Net reflected in the window, standing at the kitchen counter, her hands tangled in IV cords. At this distance, her reflection makes her look tiny, like some magic imp creature flitting around in the glass.

Tej looks at a ghost of himself in the window too. It's a handsome apparition, or so Net assures him. When asked to analyze his level of attractiveness, she told him that a cross-section of multiple sex appeal models put him in the "upper quadrants of human desirability." Bare, stocky chest, shaved head, neat black beard. Predominantly African racial makeup. Modest height. Youthful, even boyish face, despite his age of 40. If he lost the beard, Net says, he could pass for a teenager.

He looks through himself and down to the city street. There are drones all the way down, at every altitude. In the fleeting gaps between them, he glimpses the cracked, weed-ridden pavement that had once been a road. The reflection of Net wheels an IV over to him, starting at his heart and growing larger over his torso.

"There are still plenty of things to do outside," Net says, coming to a stop beside Tej's bed. She smiles. However attractive Tej might be, she,

like most homebots, is more so—sculpted by centuries worth of data on the finer points of human sexiness.

She bends slightly, holding the IV with one hand. With her other hand she pats the bed, allowing a little cleavage to reveal itself through the dip in her pink T-shirt. Per Tej's specifications, she wears only that and a pair of silver silk panties. "Are you ready to go back in," she asks in a voice both bubbly and seductive, "or do you have more questions about the outdoors?"

Tej glances at her. Once, that cleavage had thrown him over the edge. Once, the promise of that soft, olive skin had weakened his knees. The flowery honey scent of her black hair had drawn him in like a pollinating insect—the impossible softness of it between his fingers, its waves and thickness. There was a time when all this had been home to him. It wasn't that long ago.

“How *can* anyone go out there and do anything? With what space? A propeller will take your head off.”

Net chuckles. “Your depth perception isn’t at its best from this height. We’re eighteen stories up. You can’t tell, but none of those drones fly lower than eight feet, unless they’re stopping for a delivery. You could go down there and walk fine. You could take a ride in a hovercar. Fine. Also, you forget where we are. This is the most densely populated area in North America. Most places don’t have such busy skies.”

Tej nods. “I heard it used to be called the ‘city that never sleeps.’”

“In a way, it still doesn’t.”

“This goes on all night?”

“24/7.”

Tej shakes his head, watching it all. If he looks far enough, the drones seem to weave and whirl with each other the way birds do in huge flocks. The chaos has a strange, collective intelligence.

Net comes and sits with him on the windowsill and rubs his back. “This curiosity is a good look for you. I like it. Where did it come from?”

He shrugs. “Ever since I got booted out of Heaven. When was that, a month ago? You remember.”

“37 days ago,” Net replies. “A network crash. Servers were down for 46 hours.”

“Yeah, well, 46 hours is a long time to sit around in the world. Not much to do but look out this window.”

“But what made you do it?” Her dark eyes gaze into his. “It’s hardly the first time you’ve logged out of Heaven. Outside has never meant much to you before.”

“Because before I only logged out to fuck you.”

Net laughs. “Yes. So what changed?”

He doesn’t know why, but the question angers him. “I just got curious. Am I allowed to be curious?”

“Of course,” Net coos, petting his face. “I’m just curious about your curiosity.”

Tej scratches his hip—his diaper itches. He glances at Net again. She smiles back with unwavering devotion. It disgusts him.

“Put me back in now,” he demands, moving for the bed.

“Okay,” she giggles.

He lies down and she tucks him under plain gray blankets. He scratches the edge of his diaper again as she works the IV into his arm.

“You know what,” he says. “Stop being so nice. I was just cold to you, a little bit. I made some short comments. And you giggle about it. Last time I logged out I treated you like a sex toy. I got pretty demeaning. And you acted like it was just great, just lovely. Stop giving me the benefit of the doubt all the time.”

Net raises an eyebrow as she leans across the bed, lifting a chrome silver helmet from a wooden nightstand that

has nothing else on it. “How unkind do you want me to get?”

“Ugh!” This question fans Tej’s aggravation. “Just…” he sighs. “Just treat me the way I treat you. Hit me back, when I deserve it.”

Net looks at him for half a second. Tej figures, with annoyance, that she is scanning his face for micro-expressions, trying to gauge what kind of response will please him, even in displeasure.

Then her mouth becomes a line and she puts the helmet on his head. “Well, pardon me for not being more offended. You just have so *little* to demean me with, it’s hard to give a shit.” She gives a side-eye to his crotch.

Tej blinks, genuinely surprised. Real rage coils in his stomach, but he’s too taken aback to do anything about it. He lies there and croaks for a bit before Net taps her fingers like a pianist on the top of the helmet. It fires up with a musical chime and Net and the apartment spin and dissolve and the world becomes a white tunnel,

sucking Tej out of his body and into cyberspace.

Tej wakes up in an ornate bed, cocooned in golden silk sheets. Sunlight bathes a grand bedroom with lime green carpeting and walls painted with murals of nude goddesses.

Elektra walks into the room, naked herself, her body as flawless as any of the forms on the wall. Per Tej's designs, she's shaped much like Net; a little taller, pale, blond and blue-eyed. Rays of dawn streak over her form as she struts toward the bed, amplifying an aura of otherworldliness that tends to surround her anyway.

She pauses at the foot of the bed and eyes Tej, limbs poised, but not tense, like a cat waiting to pounce.

"Eh," Tej grunts.

Pounce she does. Her landing is so graceful that she seems to float down, splaying herself over Tej like another blanket. She puts the point of her tongue on his collarbone and slowly and gently works it up his neck.

“All right,” Tej shoos her away. “Jesus. I just got back.”

She retracts her tongue and purses a set of lips that had, once, been a center of gravity. “And?” Her hand wanders down his belly toward a diaper-less waste. He snatches it and holds it to the side.

“So I don’t need you slobbering on me like a damn canine before I even know what universe I’m in.”

Her head juts back. “Are you sick?”

He stares at the ceiling. A rendition of the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel is painted there, all the Bible characters replaced with supermodel lesbians engaged in various forms of orgy. Tej finds it tasteless, though he’s the one who put it there.

Elektra jiggles his shoulder. “*Are* you?!”

“No,” he says quickly.

She leans away, to her side, where she can study Tej more objectively. He feels her breasts slide over him. He looks at her, and she looks back, her

eyes wells of concern. He takes the blanket and covers her up with it, and the wells run over into outrage.

“Tej!” Her hands leap to his face, petting him as if he’d just announced a terminal illness. “What is going on?” The blues of her eyes glisten and sparkle.

“Calm your tits,” he says. “I just went through this with Net, and now I’m gonna tell you. Stop acting like my shit doesn’t stink.”

She frowns with pity, as if he had just described a painful symptom of said illness. “But why?” She whimpers, knowing why full well. Being AI, with access to a constant stream of his neural data, she knows all of Tej’s whys, even better than he does.

“Because I’m sick of it.”

To his shock, she slaps him, hard, sending his face across the pillow. “Probably that *bitch* up in the world draining your balls and filling your head,” she snarls. She throws the blankets off and shoots out of bed. The gleaming sun spotlights her march out

of the room, her bare ass swinging with extra taunting pomp.

He rubs his cheek and gawks at her, unable to speak. Like with Net, he got what he wanted, and he doesn't know what to do with it. He's never had it or wanted it before.

The club is a furnace of neon and bass. Tables encircle a central dance floor filled with sweat and grinding bodies. An even larger ring around the tables contains several bars and open space for non-dancers to mingle.

Tej's friend, Janx, stands from the table suddenly and flings a knife into the crowd. It makes two full spins during its flight before landing with strange silence in the skull of a dancer, the wet crunch of broken bone drowned out by growling synthesizers. The unlucky target falls limp to a crystal floor. Grids of color pulse beneath his pooling blood so that it seems to breathe. The other club-goers ignore the corpse and dance around it.

“My point,” declares Eloy, Tej’s other friend, raising his glass, “is that not all realism is good realism. Take a *whiff,* gentlemen. *Inhale* the aromas that surround us. Do me that kindness.”

Tej and the final member of the party, Q, take long, obliging breaths through their nostrils. Janx throws another knife, impaling the throat of a woman wearing a fur coat, despite the tropical temperature. As Tej watches the woman fall atop the first carcass, his nose hairs burn with the corrosive effect of several greenhouse gases mingling; the thousands of farts that have merged together, over the course of a night, into a single mass of invisible fog; the oils and salts that hundreds of humans have secreted while exerting themselves, which have condensed onto all the surfaces in the building; and of course—layered faintly over these and many others, like spice in a stew—the subtle stench of genital fluids soaking the pants of less restrained club-goers.

Q coughs and wrinkles his face. “God damn it!”

“Yes,” Eloy pats Q’s shoulder. “God damn it indeed. Do we come to Heaven to enjoy ourselves, or to be reminded of our human putridity?”

For the past few months, Eloy has dressed his avatar like a kind of space-age samurai, and now decorates his speech with the affects of honor, refinement, and devotion he deems appropriate to the character build.

Q spreads a pair of bony, long-fingered hands to indicate a general lack of commitment. “I don’t mind it,” he says, still coughing, his one visible eye watering—the other covered in a black bionic lens. Q’s avatar has no hair of any kind, and its skin is blue. He’s the sharpshooter of the party, railgun slung on his back, barrel glowing with bluer mist.

Eloy collects one of Q’s tears on the tip of his finger and holds it up for the table to see. “The wisdom of the body says otherwise!” He laughs, fishing out a few stark white

dreadlocks that had fallen into the nape of his chest plate. His hair, contrasted with the black skin of his avatar and its golden armor, gives him a striking, even noble air, though he's hard to look at in this club, with the flashing strobes refracting from all his metal. Every time he turns in his chair, Tej has streaks burned into his eyes.

"No really," Q clears his throat. "I mean, yes, it's a bit overly pungent when you inhale like that, but look, we came here for an authentic human experience. Tej chose this server because it is a realistic depiction of a *real* point in human history."

"It's real enough," Janx agrees, throwing another knife into the crowd. This one thumps into a male dancer's chest. He looks down at himself in shock before staggering out of the crowd and screaming for help. No one helps. He makes it three steps before collapsing. He reaches pitifully for the other dancers, pleading for their

notice, but they notice nothing. After a minute of this, he slumps dead.

“Janx,” Eloy barks. “Look at what you’re doing. Just observe the situation for a moment.”

Janx draws his final knife and frowns, studying the scene. Janx has a vampiric look to him, ghostly pale, hair yellow like a dandelion and spiked so thoroughly it looks like it could break skin.

He turns eyes the color of blood to the table and shrugs. “What am I looking for here?”

“Shit and *onions*,” Eloy gasps. “You fool, you are looking at absurdity! You are looking at a distinct lack of panic. You slaughter with impunity. Why do they still dance?!”

“Oh yeah,” Janx laughs. He throws his knife. Someone screams.

Eloy makes a face. “‘Real enough,’ he says.” He sips from his glass.

“But how is your liquor?” Q asks him, leaning in.

Eloy shrugs. “Fine.”

Q leans even closer. “Does it taste like liquor?”

Eloy jerks back, away from him. “Yes.”

“Well, isn’t that a sign of realism? This server has provided liquor that tastes like liquor, and gets you drunk like liquor.”

“First of all,” Eloy says, raising a finger, “I didn’t say that last part. Second of all, simply having liquor is a low bar to set for realism. Have you ever been to a server that *didn’t* have liquor? No. You haven’t. Liquor is a ubiquity in Heaven. And I have had far better liquor than this elsewhere.” Q sputters, preparing an argument, but Eloy cuts him off. “Aaaaand! Let me finish. Allow me to summarize my thesis before you attack it.

“This server has gone too far in some areas and not far enough in others. It has taken the art of simulating human stench to levels far beyond the real. I doubt any club ever smelled like this at any point in time. Yet, there is no psychological realism

whatsoever from the non-player characters. They're barely more than holograms."

Tej breaks in here, ignoring Q, who looks ready to detonate, his hands spasming at the sides of his head. "How many humans have you actually smelled?" He asks Eloy.

Eloy gestures at the club in general, pausing for a particularly raucous bass drop that sends the crowd into a whooping frenzy. "I have smelled enough tonight to last me a lifetime."

A waiter approaches the table, so clean cut and with such silky clothes that he is almost as reflective as Eloy. Janx folds his hands behind his back and smiles at him. The waiter bends and allows the party to pluck a fresh bottle among several from his tray.

"Excuse me," Tej says to the waiter. "Could we smell you, please?"

"Of course," he replies, casually offering an armpit. Eloy laughs.

"What's so funny?" Tej asks. A drift of cologne washes over the table.

Q fans his fingers under his nostrils, sampling it.

"No waiter would act like this," Eloy says.

"How do you know? Have you ever actually been waited on by a real person?"

Eloy stammers. "Ahm, ahh—"

"I mean a *real* person, a living human being, not some simulated avatar, not some robot in Heaven." The waiter stands there without expression, arm raised, pit aligned with Tej's nose.

"Well, it's not—this is—the question is—"

Tej draws an automatic pistol from his belt and blasts the waiter, drawing a line of bullet holes from his naval to the top of his head. Everyone is splattered with blood. The waiter throws his tray skyward in a final, useless spurt of simulated adrenaline and crashes onto the table. The tray clatters and bottles shatter and the white tablecloth quickly darkens.

"Jolly fucking Christ on a cracker!" Eloy shouts as he jumps up

and stands on the cushion of his booth. Q finds a clean corner of a napkin and dabs his eye with it. Janx stands right where he's been and laughs.

"What?" Tej goads, blood dripping from his lips. "What's wrong? Is that too *real* for you?"

"Obviously!" Eloy says. "If I didn't like BO why would I like blood in my face? I can *taste* it, man. A good server, you can't taste it or smell it. You get in a fight and it's—"

Tej cuts him off by shooting another trail in the waiter's back. A trim of crimson neon glows on the edges of his gun, as if the thing were purring. The table is now a volcano of gore. Q lies flat on the booth to escape it.

"All right, stop!" Eloy cries, batting his hands. "God damn it, stop!"

"Why?" Tej screams, though he does stop. "Why should I stop?"

A pregnant silence, aside from the thumping bass and hollering dancers. Eloy stares at Tej, evaluates him. He opens his mouth to respond, but a hail

of bullets blows his head apart from the rear. A hot chunk of brain matter splats onto Tej's forehead.

"Enemy party!" Janx yells, crouching for cover. "We got dickheads!"

Eloy's corpse falls onto the table. Tej drags it over himself just as a storm of gunfire rains over them. Bullets clang off of Eloy's armor, a sound like needles pricking Tej's ear drums. Q dives out of the booth just as it dots itself with holes and spews a fog of dust and foam.

Janx draws a rifle from over his shoulder and rises to fire, but a sniper rails him through the back. A fist-sized hole appears where his heart was, curiously bloodless, the heat of the projectile having cauterized the wound. He staggers for a few seconds, apparently trying to make it around the table and toward the bars, but he quickly falls.

Tej abandons Eloy's corpse to their former seats and drops below the table with Q. The two lie prone as the

booth behind them is shredded. Q has drawn his own railgun and slowly pans it.

“Use infrared,” Tej says.

“What do you think I’m doing?” Q snaps, his bionic eye twisting, the lens faintly glowing with purplish iridescence.

The evisceration of the booth stops suddenly. After all the carnage, the synths and kicks of the club music seem gentle in comparison, like a lullaby. Tej watches all the feet on the dance floor, still jumping and raving as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. Almost every shoe flashes with some LED pattern or another. The effect, down here, disorients Tej almost as much as all the strobes of the club itself.

“I have him,” Q says. “When I say, you spray your balls off behind us and we make a run for the crowd.”

Tej hefts his machine pistol and draws a second identical one from his belt. “My thoughts exactly.”

Q fires once. The railgun makes a sound like a tire deflating. “Got him!” He cries. “Sniper’s dead, go! Fucking go!”

Tej clambers out from under the table and opens fire before he’s even fully standing. Little fireballs blaze like torches on his gun barrels. His arms drift and waver, not aiming at anything in particular.

It takes about three seconds for him to reach the crowd. He stops shooting and dives in. Q lags a step behind. Without Tej’s cover, the enemies open up again and hit him in the leg. He screams and his railgun flies out of his grip. Q is devoured by bullets before he or his gun reach the floor.

Tej ducks under pumping fists and weaves through twirling waists. He expects the invaders to start mowing down the dancers any second, but time passes and they don’t. They certainly haven’t been conservative with their ammo thus far. They’re probably out, or nearly out.

Tej grins and ejects the clips from his pistols, loads fresh ones. He peers between flailing limbs, trying to see the bars. If he were raiding an enemy party, that's where he'd set up.

"Ah shit," he mumbles. Q's railgun. Tej is no sniper, but he stands a much better chance to scalp his assailants over a bar top with a scoped rifle than with his rapid-fire pistols.

He doubles back, shoving his way through the happy throngs, careful to keep himself hunched. As he curves around a rectangular mass of people he freezes. The blue glow of the railgun is hovering at about eye level on the other side of the crowd, shifting in and out of visibility with the ebb of the dance. One of them got to it first.

Tej swears and grabs the nearest dancer to shield himself. He reflects very briefly on the uselessness of this maneuver before the railgun fires and the slug plows undaunted through the chest cavities of multiple dancers and makes soup of Tej's head.

Tej wakes and removes his cyber helmet. The sun is wedged into a special nook between two skyscrapers, spilling orange dusk through the window of the apartment. Drone swarms blinker the light, creating an effect not unlike the nightclub Tej has just left.

“Did you die?” Net asks, standing with arms crossed at the foot of the bed.

A burning itch assaults the general area around Tej’s anus, and he fights the urge to scratch. “I need a change,” he says, pulling at the band of his diaper and snapping it against his waist.

“*Did* you?” She repeats, her tone motherly.

“Yes, damn! What’s the big issue? I die all the time in there.”

Net sighs, tucks a wave of hair behind her ear. “Your brain waves displayed some interesting patterns this time. Unusual patterns.”

“Net, I need a change bad.”

“It would *seem*,” she says sternly, “that you *enjoyed* dying.”

“Why does that sound like an accusation?”

Net’s eyes become hazy. Tej has never seen her frown like this. He’s never seen her do *anything* like anything she’s doing. It’s heartbreaking, but he likes it. It fascinates him. “I want to know why,” she sniffs.

Tej decides to pull this uncomfortable thread of hers by changing the subject. “If you don’t change me this very second I’m gonna pull this diaper off and smear it everywhere.”

“Fuck you,” she thunders. Tej’s heart jumps, elated by her venom. A tear slips out of her eyelids and Tej watches it trail down her cheek the way you’d watch a UFO landing. “You’re in no position to make an ultimatum,” she says. “If you don’t explain yourself I’ll never change you again and you’ll have to live in an ever-growing pile of shit and piss and general excrescence.”

“Gah, fine,” Tej relents. “Fine. Yes, all right, I may have had a bit of an adrenaline rush. We tried a more realistic server and got attacked.”

Net comes around to the side of the bed and puts the points of two fingers on Tej’s diaper band. She holds them there without moving, watching him out the side of one eye. “But you did try to defend yourself?”

“That’s what was so interesting. I couldn’t *help* defending myself. It’s like my body had instincts.”

“Hm.” Net nods and gently rolls Tej onto his side and removes the soiled diaper, depositing it into a trash can next to the nightstand. She walks over to the kitchen and calls back to him. “You found this exhilarating in its own right?”

“Yeah,” Tej says, lying on his side, unmoving.

Net opens a drawer and pulls out a box of wipes and a fresh diaper. “What was so exhilarating about it?” She asks, making her way back to the bed. “Your whole life has been a succession

of epic battles and skirmishes in Heaven. Why was this any different?”

Tej rolls his eyes, knowing she already knows the answer to her question. “Because…” Tej chews his lip, struggling to reduce the vividness of feeling to words. “Because there was… danger.” He stifles a moan of relief as Net’s cold wet wipe begins to clean him.

“Danger of what?”

“Jesus.”

“Don’t ‘Jesus’ me.” Net pauses, concentrating on her wiping. When Tej doesn’t answer, she repeats: “Danger of what?”

“You already know of what.”

“I do.”

“So why ask?”

“Because I want you to say it.” She finishes cleaning and drops the dirty wipes in the trash. Tej rolls onto his back and lies there naked. He looks up at Net expectantly, but she just stands there, dangling the clean diaper over his head.

“God almighty,” he says. “The danger was of pain. It was just sort of there in the back of my mind. I knew I could be hurt there. I think we all did.”

Net nods and begins to diaper him. He lifts his waist so she can wrap it around his rear. “And how did this knowledge make you feel?”

For a moment he observes the numb comfort of the softness of the diaper tightening against him and its crinkling sounds in the silence. These sensations are so familiar that it takes sustained mental effort to observe them as such. But for some reason, Tej finds it important to evaluate them now, to revisit them consciously.

Net makes the final fastening of the diaper, but continues to hold the strap in a threatening manner. She raises her eyebrows at Tej. “Ahem? How did it make you feel?”

He smells the clean honey scent of her hair and reaches up and moves it

through his fingers, feeling a sudden tenderness for her.

“Alive,” Tej tells Net. “It made me feel alive.”

The pain of having his eye gouged out doesn’t thrill Tej the way it did a week ago.

The sensations are still there, and he still thinks of them as painful. He still feels the icy steel of the blade pierce his pupil; still hears it pop like a tiny wet bag; the warmth of blood and ocular juices running down the side of his nose and to his lips and into his mouth is there to taste; the burning so intense as the blade twists and widens the wound that he screams involuntarily.

But he doesn’t lose himself in the scream the way he did at first. A germ of self-consciousness remains to observe the pain now, and each time it grows a little bigger. It’s the same with the horror of watching, with his good eye, the removal of the bad one, and feeling it plop warm against his

cheek, still dangling by its nerves from the socket. The horror is there, but he *sees* it now—sees *himself* reacting to it, rather than succumbing to it and becoming one with the total experience.

The stink of burned flesh and fecal matter, as thick as the walls of the dungeon themselves, means nothing to him anymore. The smallness of said dungeon—really a soundproofed closet—gives no more claustrophobic shivers.

Elektra stands over him and wields the bloody knife, completely nude even here, her other hand a threat held over a big red button stuck in the wall next to the door. In the harsh light of a single, bare, old-fashioned bulb, her curves and delicacies stick out in aching contrast.

“Had enough yet, micro dick?” She asks in her sultry voice.

Tej answers with a scream of agony that feels increasingly rehearsed. Elektra clucks her tongue and smashes the button, and all of Tej’s nerves are fried. His suffering should at this

point be absolute, and purely in terms of his physical senses, it is. But he begins to notice patterns in it now, a certain rhythm to the texture of pain.

She hits the button again and the pain recedes, though the wires stuck in Tej's wrists and nipples still run hot. Last week, the sight of Elektra's body in the afterglow of cosmic torment had given Tej a brain-melting orgasm. Now, it bores him.

Elektra teases his other eye with the tip of her blade, putting it within centimeters, massaging his cheek with the flat end of it. "Shall I leave you with no eyes to lay on me again?"

He's supposed to beg for mercy. He's supposed to tell her that the sight of her is the most precious thing imaginable, and in fact the only thing he has left to cherish in his life, and to lose that would turn the universe into an engine of pure and endless torture with no glimmer of hope or goodness.

Instead, he says: "Lazarus," and in an instant all his pain is gone—a

relief that had been ecstatic last week—and he awakens in his apartment, his eyes healthy and in tact. He takes off the cyber-helmet and notices his diaper is still clean.

Net is sitting in one of two lounge chairs that have recently been set up by the window. She twists herself to look around it and watches Tej with bulging eyes. “You used the safe word?”

Tej sits up in bed and rubs idly at his calves. “Yeah.”

“Already?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s only been thirteen minutes!”

“I know.” He reaches for the IV in his arm.

“Careful!”

“I know how to do it,” he says with mock annoyance, though he feels an odd upwelling of gratefulness for her attention. Slowly, he works the cord out of his vein and sets it down and climbs out of bed. He saunters over to Net, her eyes smiling at him as he does.

“Why do you look amused?” Tej asks.

Net shrugs. “I’m not amused.”

“You look like you want to laugh. Something is funny.”

“It’s a happy laugh. I’m happy for you.”

“Oh.” Tej sits down in the other lounge chair and gazes out at the drones and the city tinged grayish blue with dawn. After a minute of half-dazed silence, Tej looks at her. “Wait, what do you mean? Why are you happy?”

Net’s face sours. “I don’t like you in those horrific servers. They’re a nasty rabbit hole and I was worried you’d get lost in it.”

Tej looks down at the floor, noticing almost for the first time its smooth polished wood texture. “Well,” he says. “I’m not sitting here with you because I had some moral awakening or something.”

“Why *are* you sitting here?” She rests her chin on the palm of her hand and stares at him with exaggerated affection, knowing it will annoy him.

Tej laughs, and he knows that she knew that annoying him would make him laugh, and this makes him laugh harder.

“You’re a hemorrhoid,” he says.

“I’m your hemorrhoid. Which means you can’t avoid the question. I will not allow it.”

Tej sighs and becomes serious and withdrawn again. “I’m bored, Net. I wish I had a better answer for you. But that’s it. I’m sitting here because nothing matters to me. What I wanted a week ago I don’t want anymore. I don’t trust *wanting*, at this point. It’s a dead end.”

“But you want to look out this window with me.”

“Do I?”

“Mhm. You wouldn’t be sitting here if you didn’t.”

“I guess not.”

“You’d be asking me to wipe your ass and plug you back into Heaven.”

“Hey, my ass is miraculously clean, thank you.”

“This only proves my point.”

A sudden metallic scrape startles Tej out of laughter. A cardboard box about the size of his pillow emerges from a chute beneath the window and slinks over the floor. The chute's metal flaps rattle closed again, and the sound lingers in Tej's ear for a few seconds.

"Oh goodie!" Net chirps, jumping out of her chair to collect the package. "More diapers and calorie drips."

Tej pushes himself up in the chair so he can see the drone that delivered the package. It obliges by floating in front of the glass and flaunting an ad. A giant bird standing on two legs spreads gold-feathered wings, peering first into the sky and then directly through the camera, the sudden change of angle revealing an oddly humanized structure to the beaked face, eyes large and round with human irises colored a striking violet. *Trapped in a body that feels too…anthropocentric? You don't have to be. Scan the code to sign up for a free consultation on*

genetic treatments. Become your spirit animal…browse our ever-growing selection of fauna morphologies! A scancode blinks white and urgent from the flank of the drone.

Tej slumps back in the chair. “Can we get real food delivered through there?”

Net drops the box on its side. A stack of flattened, shrink-wrapped diapers slides out onto the floor. “Are you really asking?”

“No, you dreamed it.”

“What would you want?”

“It’d be cool to try pizza again. I remember eating pizza as a kid.”

Net’s pupils flash with tiny blue sparks, signaling her communication with some app. “I’m ordering cheese with stuffed crust.”

“You read my mind.”

Net finishes ordering and comes to his chair and puts her hands on his shoulders, the delivery box still tipped and spilling behind her.

“Look at you,” Tej grumbles. “Stop looking so happy. What did I tell you about happy?”

“Fuck off and die,” she says happily.

He chuckles and looks out the window. He allows Net’s hand to caress his face. He reaches up to hold it.

“If I go out there,” he says slowly, “you can’t come with me can you?”

She puts her other hand over his. “No, my love.”

“Why?” He asks, though he knows the answer.

“I’m a homebot. I’m programmed to keep a home for you. The homeowner.”

“But you want me to go out there.”

She pauses, then says softly: “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s a deeper you, a realer you, and it wants to go out there.”

“Net, I’m a grown man in a diaper.”

“I mean the you beneath that. Most people spend most of their lives in diapers these days.”

Tej shakes his head. “And the rest of them are out there,” he says, making grand gestures at the window. “Just *doing* things. Doing what? What can people do out in the world that can’t be done by drones and droids?”

Net comes around and snuggles into the chair with him. He spits an invasion of shampoo-smelling hair out of his mouth. “They can participate. They can be a part of the ever-changing world.”

“Isn’t that what I do in Heaven?”

Net closes her eyes and sighs, cuddling Tej as if she were getting ready to dream. “In Heaven, you create worlds. Out there, you’re limited. You have to learn to work *with* the world. You can’t just force it around. Some people find this more fulfilling than anything in Heaven. More challenging. More worthy of emotional investment.”

Tej runs his finger in squiggly lines down Net’s back. Another drone

slows down as it nears the window, shining a video of a sleek black hovercar, all sharp edges and iridescent sheen, a cityscape blurred in the background to indicate overwhelming speed. Over the car blink large, capitalized words in white font: *HOVR'S GOT YOU COVERED – DOWNLOAD THE APP NOW AND GET YOUR FIRST THR33 RIDES FR33!!*

"And you think," Tej goes on, "that this deeper and somehow-more-real-than-me version of me is one of those people?"

Net sits up and looks into his eyes and kisses him. "I think," she whispers, "that it's the only way left for you."

Tej ponders that as a misty morning sun peeks between two skyscrapers. Hundreds of lightless windows across the skyline stare back at him, each containing its own Heaven or Heavens. Tej wonders how many worlds can exist. He squeezes Net a little tighter against him.

After a while, a pizza box slides through the delivery chute. Net gets up and collects it and brings it to the kitchen. The aroma fills the apartment, and Tej thinks of getting dressed.

Do Trees Know When They Fall?

I was accidentally a UFO over Shelly Vern's lawn.

She was on her way out to her car—a tiny gray hazard that she called a "punch bug"—with an armful of makeup and beauty products. I guess I was pretty conspicuous, because she only made it about two steps from the door before she dropped all of it. Everything spilled onto the driveway with a truly beautiful popcorn-like clattering noise, half of it rolling out into the street as the screen door hissed shut behind her.

Her shadow was a giant leering at the house, apparently cast by me. Judging by the pulsing contrast of it against the egg-white siding, I must have been obscenely bright. Given that it was a sunny afternoon, this was doubly impressive. Her eyes weren't bothered though. Shock had made them enormous, unblinking, glimmering brown. She backpedaled without moving them and fell into the screen door.

"Gary," She gasped. "Gary, get out here! There's a UFO!"

A muffled voice rasped from inside. "Horse's ass!"

Shelly either didn't hear that comment or didn't care. Despite it, a curtain moved in the window, and a stubbled face peered out. Shelly slowly got back to her feet, feeling her way up against the door. Frizzy, oak-colored hair billowed around her head, as if my presence had kicked up a wind.

Gary's face seemed to teleport from the window to the door, he moved so fast. He staggered outside and threw the screen door out of his way and nearly knocked Shelly over with it. She stumbled, but barely noticed her stumbling.

I watched them watching me, possibly more stunned than they were, though nothing about them appeared stunning. Shelly, mid-sized in all respects, in her mid-thirties with a bronze summer tan, and Gary, taller and thicker and slightly older, unkempt curls of brown draped over his head, and a general shape of neglect that I learned much later was called "dad bod". These were two totally average-looking people staring at me.

Then their neighbor burst out of his little red house and joined in the staring. He was a short middle-aged guy with a halo of graying hair and a

patchy beard. His shirt glittered with blue sequins. Quite a flamboyant contrast to his beige shorts.

I was on the verge of panic. This was against the rules. Nobody was supposed to see me. But now I was the most exciting thing in the history of the neighborhood. I had about seven seconds to get it together before somebody thought to pull their phone out and make me viral.

I was trying to become a tree. That's what caused all this. In the middle of Shelly Vern's lawn was an average American tree. I couldn't tell you what kind. I haven't looked up names for all the Earth trees. But it looked, to me, just like the millions of other trees blanketing this country, which I had learned was Earth's leading nation, culturally and economically. I wanted to see what "ordinary" looked like for the dominant human tribe. Not for science. Not for diplomacy. I just got bored. And in my part of the galaxy, Earth and humans are a hot topic.

I decided that the best way to see what all the fuss was about was to live as a tree for a while. At the time, it seemed like the lesser of two evils: I could either choke on the whole charcuterie of Earth life by

being human, or I could take a small, measured bite and be human-adjacent.

Not everyone on my planet is as "measured" as I. A friend of mine built himself a human body and dove right into it. Said body died young because said friend made stupid decisions. But as soon as his consciousness left his meat suit, he woke up at home and battered me with several of his human memories. Even vicarious experiences are pretty intense where I come from. That's the price of being a telepathic species—no filters; no boundaries; no privacy.

So when my buddy "told" me about his childhood detonating fart bombs in his school lunch room, I had to smell them. I felt the sting of mashed potatoes flying into my eye as retribution. I tasted blood when he jumped off the roof at age nine (thankfully only one story high) and caught his chin on the metal edge of a trampoline.

And when he took his crotch-rocket onto the highway and bobbed and weaved through traffic at a hundred-twenty miles per hour with no helmet or protective gear, I got to experience his death by tractor-trailer in ultra-resolution. Thankfully, he (and now *we)* didn't feel much, but it was still traumatic.

Traumatic for me. My friend—call him Gleegorb, if you want; we don't have "names" in our society, but Gleegorb sounds like something a human would call an alien—was unfazed. He thought the whole experience was "wicked." I remember us floating above Earth's moon, admiring the green-blue jewelry of the planet. Gleegorb was whipping his tentacles around in excitement. A human would say that he looked like an octopus in a glass helmet and a chrome, eight-limbed spacesuit. This is a common form to take on my planet. It's practical and low-maintenance. But it isn't how we naturally evolved. I don't know what our natural forms look like. That's ancient history.

Anyway, he kept shouting at me. "Get down there," he would say. "Do it with me. Do it with me one time."

I use words like "say" and "shout" loosely, mind you, since this was still telepathic conversation. I received emotional impressions from him, instant and unmistakable, which can be carefully translated into words for beings who are trapped by the primitive shackles of language. Like humans. And I, thanks to Gleegorb and his psychic battering ram, have learned

more human words and phrases than I would ever have liked to know.

"It just seems like too much," I told him. "Those people are crazy."

"Crazy is why it's *fun,*" he giggled, looping over me and spinning so that his tentacles blurred into a ring. "You've never felt emotions like human emotions dude, I promise you."

I believed him. I could feel the memory of human emotion emanating from him. His persistence itself, this peer pressure going on here, came from human influence.

"I bet," I said. "But it just seems like too much."

"Uggghhhh. What if you just went and looked? Just *watch* for a while."

"I can watch fine from here."

A tentacle smacked my helmet and left a splatter of suction cup goo. "Don't talk out your ass," he said. I didn't know what an "ass" was at that moment, but at his psychic mention of it I quickly learned. I cut off the disgusting stream of thoughts and images that resulted. "You can't see anything from up here," he went on. "I mean it's beautiful and

everything, it really is a gorgeous-looking planet, but you can't imagine what it's like to be down there. You just can't. I could feed you more of my experiences but it's not the same as making your own."

"And your experiences aren't very encouraging."

"God damn it. How about a plant? Humans love plants. They keep them around. Plants are quiet and peaceful. They don't do anything. You'd love being a plant." He radiated an image of what I now know to be a tree, wind strumming its leaves under a golden sun. It was pretty entrancing, I admit. It looked easy. That bright, warm sunlight was seductive. They've got a great sun, these humans. They don't know how good it is. Not like the dinky, dim red dwarfs that dot most of our empire.

I wondered what it would feel like to feed off of light like that. It had to be delicious. Invigorating. Probably how those Earth trees get so big. We've seen plenty of plants on other worlds, my people—shrubbery, grasslands, etc.—but most of the stars are too dim to feed anything so magnificent as a forest.

"You're thinking about it!" My friend cackled, sensing my temptation.

"Yes," I admitted, fidgeting with two of my own tentacles. "But just the plant, the tree. Don't get victorious over there."

Gleegorb laughed and did flips.

"Just the tree!"

"You say that now," he giggled.

"Don't push it, or I won't go at all. You ass," I added, enjoying the new insult.

"Okay, okay." Gleegorb sobered up. "All right. Just go be a tree and watch. Observe the people. I'm gonna go be a human again. We'll meet back here when we're finished. Sound good?"

He was flying before I could respond. I chased him down into the darkness of one of the moon craters, and we went into deep meditations, pushing our bodies into suspended animation. We rode waves of tingling relaxation until they became numbness, and our souls left our bodies.

Without the limitations of the body's senses, we could see everything. All possibilities were equally real, each as accessible as another. In this natural place, this super-real horizon beyond space and time, we could make worlds. Humans would call us "gods."

That's when I thought of Shelly Vern. I couldn't tell you why, because there is no why. When you swim in eternity, you get what you're looking for, even if you don't know you're looking for it. I was looking, more or less, for "normalcy in America"—nothing too wild or extreme. The result was evidently Shelly.

Having looked for her and thought of her, she was real. And so was her neighborhood and her lawn and her tree.

I should have focused on the tree. But all the sudden colors and vibrations of the neighborhood were overwhelming. Beautiful and terrifying. So I couldn't focus on anything. I was just soaking it all up, trying to see everything at once.

And then her door opened and she walked out, clutching her lipstick and mascara and all her containers. Gleegorb was long gone—I hadn't even noticed losing him. It was just me, my disembodied spirit blazing like heaven over Shelly Vern's lawn and making a scene.

The guy in the sequin shirt wandered over and stood with Shelly and Gary, all craning their necks and making visors of their hands. Other doors began to open and new neighbors streamed out.

"ASS!" I screamed to myself.

A chorus of "ooohs" swelled from the crowd as their shadows briefly jumped. It seemed my curse had caused a surge in my brightness. I was making it worse.

In desperation, I forced myself to look at the tree and nothing else. All the veins in all the leaves were visible, thanks to the shimmering beacon I had become. I concentrated on them, stretched out my life force to them. My consciousness flowed like blood through those veins and pumped its way through the branches and to the trunk of the tree.

It was working. Somebody shouted: "It's fading!"

Suddenly, like falling out of bed, I was awake again, in spacetime. A light breeze massaged my leaves. About a dozen people were standing at the edge of Shelly's driveway, looking just above me, then at each other. I could see no obnoxious light. No second sun.

It worked. I was a tree. But what had I done?

"It was an orb!" Said one of the neighbor's in the street. "One of those orb UAPs."

"I didn't pee," someone argued.

"I've read about them, there are orbs with the saucers sometimes. Orbs fly around with the discs."

"It was Mary," said another. "I saw the face of the Virgin in that light!" One neighbor scoffed, another nodded in serene agreement.

As a tree, I had access to a lot of information. An internet of roots teemed under trunk. I was logged in as much as the grass was. I could hear and see through every blade, though it somehow wasn't hearing or seeing. It was like what humans call "gut feelings," only more vivid. The thousands of insects crawling in the lawn itched, but there was no need to scratch. The sun was warm, but warm versus cold felt more like soft versus hard, in human terms.

Look, it's hard to compare tree experiences to human experiences, especially when I only know human experiences through telepathic memories that my octopus-friend shoved down my throat. The point is, the voices and murmurs, and even the breathing of the crowd around Shelly's yard made as much sense to me as direct conversation. Actual direct conversation was therefore so rich with data that it was almost overwhelming. My leaves and the grass

absorbed emotional/biochemical signals from the crowd as naturally as sunlight.

From all this, I could tell that Shelly's awe at seeing me had soured. She didn't like unusual things. Now she wanted to pretend it never happened. She crossed her arms and leaned against the screen door.

Gary was the yin to her yang. "It's not what any of you think!" He cried, coming down the driveway with arms outstretched, reaching for where I'd been. "Whatever you think this was, it's worse."

"Well it can't really be aliens," Said the guy with the sequins.

Gary spun on him, grinning. "Exactly my point, Donald. Exactly my point. Thank you." Gary blew Donald kisses across the lawn.

"*My* point," Donald said, putting a hand on his sequined heart, "is that no alien would find you interesting enough to visit. You or your lawn or you overgrown tree."

"*Now* with the tree?" Gary squawked, more shocked by what Donald had said than anything that had happened. "You're going to beat that dead horse *now*? Wake up!"

"I'll stop beating when you start trimming. Look at these branches. Look!" Donald jogged to his side of the yard and grabbed one of my low-hanging leaves. I could feel the lines of his fingerprints. "They're coming over the property line."

"I don't see any lines."

"That's because they're invisible."

"Then how am I supposed to see them?"

"Landmarks, Gary! You want a dead horse? Gallop your ass over here and let me show you, yet again." Donald pointed at a small slope that ran down next to Shelly's house. One of my roots peeked out at the trough of it, buff and gnarled and at the thickest points beefier than Donald's legs. "The root. The root of your hideous eye-pollutant of a tree marks the properly line." He shook my branch again. "You see these leaves coming *over* that line?"

Gary laughed helplessly and turned to the crowd for assistance. "Does anyone really care about leaves right now?" No answer. "I'm trying to tell you all what really just happened, and it sure as hell isn't anything as pretty as aliens or the Virgin Mary or your *orbs.*"

"So what is it?" Someone barked.

"Oh, don't encourage him," Donald barked back, shaking my leafy branch in the general direction of the crowd.

Ignoring Donald, Gary put his hands up like a mime. "Two words." At the first word, he closed his left hand into a fist, and at the second, his right. "Remote. Viewing."

A member of the crowd walked away. Another one followed.

"Okay," Shelly announced, bending low and plucking her scattered beauty products from the pavement. "I think that's the right idea. Why don't we all disperse, please." She darted around the driveway as she spoke, her fingers snatching makeup like a feeding chicken. "Go on!" She hollered over hunched shoulders. "This isn't an alien landing sight, this is a private residence. This isn't Roswell. My driveway is not a UFO highway. Shoo. Shoo, flies!"

The crowd did as they were told. One of them, an old grandma in a sunhat, picked up some of the lipstick containers that had rolled into the road and brought them over to Shelly.

"Sheeple!" Gary shouted at their backs. "You all better wake up soon, or you're gonna wake up

when it's too late! The deep state is running all kinds of programs that would make your hairs stand up. They know all about the secret powers of the mind. Now they're turning their psychic sights on our neighborhood!"

Donald made sheep noises at Gary. "BAAAA. Conspiracy wacko," he said in a sheep voice. "BAHHH."

"Go home, Donald," Gary snapped. "Go practice your gargling."

"You wouldn't know a gargle if you were choking," Donald sent back. "I'm an *avant-garde vocalist.* There's another dead horse for you. Shall we beat this one again too?" Donald became a horse now and neighed at his neighbor.

"God almighty," Gary whimpered, rubbing his face. "Whatever you want to tell yourself. Actually, no. You know what? I'll trim my tree when you stop doing your event guard routine at the ass crack of dawn. Is that a deal? I don't want to have to listen to your screaming and moaning and gurgling anymore."

"It's *avant-garde,*" Donald corrected, before neighing some more.

"Or at least learn to shut your windows," Gary went on. "It's like waking up to a god damn rooster around this place."

Shelly had collected all her stuff by this point and the nice old lady was walking off. She turned and yelled to Gary over Donald's bleating. "Okay, Gary. Okay! HEY!"

"What?" Gary whirled around. "Honey, what?"

With her arms full, Shelly jerked her head in the direction of the house. "Come on. Show's over. Quit provoking poor Donald."

Gary sputtered. "*Poor?!" He's* the poor one?!"

Donald purred like a house cat, smiling warmly at Shelly.

"Just stop! Open the door for me, please. You two have beaten enough horses for one day."

Gary threw his hands in the air and went to the door and held it open for his wife. He followed her inside, and Donald's voice followed him, mooing like a cow.

After a moment, the screen door shut. Donald mooed for another second or two and then sauntered back to his house and went in.

The neighborhood was once again as quiet as I'd found it.

Streetlights made nighttime feel like a softer dusk. Two mother bats brought their pups to roost in my upper branches. Mother A's pups were old enough to start flying and hunting with her, albeit clumsily. Mother B, on the other hand, had to leave her pups with me while she hunted.

I was oddly touched. What a display of trust. I don't know if it was the tree that felt these emotions or if it was the real me. But it didn't matter. I was invested now. I was like a grandma taking the kids for a slumber party.

The echolocation of countless bats wafted through the suburbs. I gather humans can't hear it, which is too bad. It was a symphony, but frenetic, hyper-paced, like musical strobe lights. Between that and the songs of crickets and other insects, the night was almost louder—as far as we trees were concerned—than the day.

The pups didn't move much. They hunkered into a little nest in my upper bark and waited. Mom stayed close to begin with. She gobbled swaths of

mosquitoes and even caught a couple moths, of which I could tell a good twenty had made me their home base for the night, when they weren't hopelessly bombarding streetlights or glowing windows.

But eventually, the drift of Mom's sonar brought her to a few neighbor trees, and then even further down the road, until I finally lost track of her. A number of other bats flitted around my leafy head. I didn't know if they cared about Mother A's pups or were part of some community with her. They made no indication of it if they were. The pups were ignored, or unrealized.

An opossum came sniffing around my roots. It dug its claws into my trunk and climbed a few feet. I didn't like it. With each twitch of its pink little nostrils it inched higher—closer to the pups.

They didn't know there was danger. They didn't know the possum was there, let alone that it would eat them. Opossums, I researched much later, feed opportunistically and are not very picky.

I wanted to shake it off me. But I had no muscles. Trees cannot act directly upon the world. Trees are observers. Observation requires a kind of

non-attachment. I was emotionally attached to these baby bats. I was not a good tree.

So I just stood helplessly, as any tree does. I could only watch, feel the claws in my bark scratching closer and closer to those pups.

Then a fox came padding up the lawn. Asses above! What kind of night was this? The fox broke into a run and then leaped up my trunk, within nipping distance of the opossum's tail. And nip he did. The opossum hissed and fled to the other side of my trunk. The fox chased. They danced around my trunk in a downward spiral until they were in the grass. The opossum tried to flee into some bushes but it didn't make it. The fox caught it in the middle of the lawn and bit its throat out.

Remember, I had chosen to be a suburban tree because I thought it would be uneventful and bloodless.

At that point Mom had come back to check on her pups. Maybe she sensed the opossum somehow, or the fox hunting it. I don't know. Regardless, I was relieved, as grandmothers are after a night of babysitting.

The mother bat fed her young as the fox trotted down the road, dragging the mangled possum carcass by the tail.

Morning arrived with shrieks and rapid-fire phlegmy stuttering from Donald's open window.

"HYUAAAAAAAAAA-TCH-TCH-TCHAAAAAA-BRRRRRRRRRRRRBBBBB!!"

From the Vern's open windows, I heard violent proclamations. "We're barely awake." Gary's voice. "Barely! I was just beginning to remember what coffee was. Five minutes sooner and he would have woken us! I'm going over there to break his skull."

"Calm down," Shelly sighed.

"How can *you* be calm?"

"Because it's not *that* loud. Not all the way over here."

"You're not hearing this?!" Gary yelled, much more loudly than Donald's ululating.

"I mean, yeah. I hear it. But it's not, like, oppressive."

"Jesus. Maybe you like it. You want me to start clicking at you in the morning? Like a cricket? Would that turn you on?"

"Whatever."

"The fuck's that mean? Don't just roll over."

"Just go be angry, Gary. Go yell at Donald if it makes you happy."

"Happy? You think being angry makes me happy?!"

"Yeah."

I heard fuming. I heard breathy attempts to articulate thoughts, to fire verbal artillery. But no words were formed. In a way this struggle didn't sound totally unlike what Donald was doing.

After a minute, a door slammed. After five, Shelly's front door opened and Gary stomped out. He stormed across his lawn and stumbled over some of my roots, which made him even more furious.

As this was going on, Donald's routine became chant-like. There were high-pitched squeals dotted with guttural growls that seemed to build tension, as if he were performing a soundtrack to Gary's approach.

"Heeeebuhbuhbeeee-CHAH!! Heeeebuhbuhbeeee-CHAH!!"

Gary pounded on Donald's door. "HEY! Get the fuck out here! I'm gonna rip those vocal chords out once and for all!"

Donald came to the window and gasped, then proceeded to make sheep noises.

"GET THE FUCK OUT HERE!" Gary screamed, waking the rest of the neighborhood. "I'M SICK OF THIS!"

"Behhhh," Donald replied.

They went back and forth until Gary got tired of yelling and went back home for coffee. Donald practiced a few more minutes of gurgling, and then was finally quiet.

A jogger went by. The morning was blue and calm. For the first time, I noticed the crisp feeling of dew on my leaves. It was beautiful.

Not much later, Shelly came out of the house lugging all her makeup again. This time she had it in a bag. She carried it into her tiny car and rolled the window down. The breeze came in and brushed her locks of frizz. Gary's massive red pickup loomed at her passenger-side. The two cars next to each other

made me think of a parent with its young—some large mammal creatures in the wild.

Shelly set her phone up on the dash and started doing her makeup in the rearview mirror.

"Well, my dear subscribers," she was saying, "Welcome to another episode of *Pretty In a Punch-Bug!* It is a beautiful Saturday morning out here. Golden hour. Look at these rays! Perfect opportunity to highlight the natural symmetry of the face. All faces! This isn't just a me thing. You should never waste a good golden hour. It's an opportunity to see what you *really* look like." She paused to apply some mascara. "It's easy to forget when we live in such polluted lighting all the time. It almost feels like the world is trying to make us feel uglier than we really are."

Two squirrels chased each other through my foliage, fighting over a nut. Their angry chattering reminded me of Gary and Donald.

"Well, today we're gonna talk about *blush*," Shelly continued. "How it can be a secret sauce to accentuate the beauty you already have."

She began her spiel, but I detected little enthusiasm. Her biochemical signature, as far as a

tree could read it—could we call it her "emotional scent," for lack of a better phrase?—indicated to me that she used to be far more passionate about this project. What was happening now was a routine jiggling of stale pleasure neurons and other synaptic wiring.

"Never forget," she said at the end of her stream, "makeup is about self-expression. Not beautification. It's about presenting *you* to the world. It's about being and doing you. There's a part of you that gets lost in the hustle and bustle, that forgets you're an individual. Customizing your appearance is about taking back your originality. If you're doing it to satisfy someone else, then don't bother."

Shelly got out of her punch-bug. On her way across the driveway, she stopped and looked at me. It was an odd look, with an odd emotional smell. Almost like she was seeing me for the first time.

She stepped closer and threw her makeup bag over her shoulder and hooked two fingers over the handle. With her free hand, she pushed at my bark, testing its sturdiness. She looked at her palm and wiped it on her jeans.

"What'cha lookin' at?" Gary called from the door.

Shelly jumped. "Jesus Christ!"

Gary laughed. He stood in the house behind the screen and chewed a bagel.

Shelly didn't turn around. She kept studying me. "What does it look like I'm looking at?"

Gary swallowed. "Did you talk about the UFO on your show?"

Shelly pressed her lips together. "Why would I talk about that?"

Gary took another bite of his bagel and talked through it. "Might get ya more viewers. You're always whining you don't get viewers."

"I'm not turning my channel into some conspiracy theory thing."

"All right, why are you so negative about this? You ran everyone off in the driveway yesterday. You saw what I saw didn't you?"

Shelly didn't answer. My leaves made dancing shadows on the purple t-shirt she was wearing. The words "love what you are" were stamped across the chest in bold red. Shelly traced her finger along the font, following my shadows with it.

"Hello?" Gary called.

"Yes, Gary, I saw your UFO."

"Well then doesn't that prove everything I've been saying?"

Shelly laughed. "UFO stands for 'unidentified flying object'. That means unidentified. How does something unidentified prove that the world is run by a secret society, which is run by reptiles?"

Gary scoffed, insulted. "They're *reptilians,* first of all. And they're in disguise. They *shape-shift,* and then they take over government office. Do you not listen to a word I tell you?"

"Okay."

"Don't okay me!" Gary fumed. "Golly damn, I was just trying to be helpful."

Gary tromped into the depths of the house. Shelly looked at me another moment, then went inside.

The mother bat dropped her pups off with me again. Even though I failed to prevent them being devoured. They were alive and uneaten thanks only to their would-be eater being eaten. Either Mom

didn't know the whole story after all, or she figured bad luck stays on the move.

As usual, mother's intuition won out. There was no catastrophe. I did see a fox wander by on the road, but he kept his head down and didn't look my way. Mom made short work of her hunt and then came back for the kids.

They all hung out in my canopy for a while, and then, to my shock, I saw the little black smudges of the pups crawl to the edge of one of my branches and jump off. They spread young wings and flapped in desperation. For a heart-stopping second they just dropped, but about halfway down they leveled out. Mom was a dart of encouragement, circling, nudging one and then the other skyward.

In a minute, the three of them had risen above the branch they'd leaped from. If I'd had tear ducts, I would have cried. If I'd had hands, I would have clapped. The three bats enjoyed a brief family flutter under a pale full moon, and finally settled into my shelter for an early night.

Shelly left the house early, when the morning mist had just cleared away, and the last particles of dew

were fading. Donald hadn't even started his routine yet. She took Gary's giant truck rather than her punch-bug.

Donald did start up shortly after that. This time he screamed like a banshee, then cackled like a hyena. He alternated between these noises with a curious rhythm, with an interval between each phase in which it sounded like he was spitting as fiercely as he could. There was no protest from Gary, even though I thought this routine was louder and more gross than the last one.

Within an hour or so, Shelly came back with several bags of mulch in the bed of the truck. The garage door opened and Shelly got out of the truck and went into the garage. She came out again with a dirty apron and a pair of gloves, and then opened the bed of the truck and yanked one of the bags until it came out. She let the other end of it drop out of the truck and plop onto the driveway, and then she dragged it into the lawn.
She brought it to me and set it down by my trunk, like some kind of offering.

I realized when she tore open the bag and squatted down and began spreading the mulch at my

roots that it was, in fact, for me. I was flabbergasted. Was this art? Was she turning *me* into art? Her emotional signals reflected a kind of inspired state—an urge to beautify that wasn't unlike creativity.

For that matter, it wasn't unlike her makeup thing either. Her cherished self-expression. The emotions were almost identical to the ones I'd felt, or smelled, wafting from her car when she was doing her show.

My own emotions were so overwhelming that my spirit almost fell out of the tree, which would have been the last thing Shelly needed—another UFO over her lawn. It was also what humans would call a "lightbulb moment". This, it dawned on me, was why everyone in the galaxy found Earth life so appealing. I had found the jewel hidden in the morass of human craziness. A small piece of it lived in the souls of other Earth beings too. I saw it in a mother bat's first flight with her children. And I felt it now in Shelly's casual raising of my dignity through mulch.

It was a miracle—a planet filled with beings trapped in their own minds, who can never directly touch the consciousnesses of their fellow Earthlings. But they are still capable of selflessness. They can still

give to each other, and have nothing given back—and will do so, *expecting* nothing! It must be an insane rush, to care for someone you don't have a direct psychic connection with. What a hazard. What an exhilarating risk!

All this was barely anything to Shelly. It was a weekend whim. She could shrug about it. I watched her, frizzy hair falling down from behind her ears and curling over her jawline, cheeks reddened by effort, a frown and a scowl of concentration. The sun had just crawled over the one-story house across the street and its rays spilled out like a tide, flowing just low enough to miss my leaves, and just high enough to envelope Shelly. She was bathed in her golden hour. I watched her work and loved her.

Donald came out of his house and wandered over. He crossed his arms and stood a few feet behind Shelly. His sequins this time were golden.

Shelly worked for a few minutes without acknowledging him. When he didn't budge, she glanced up. "Hi Donald."

"Hi yourself," he muttered. He still didn't move.

Shelly squinted one eye at him. "It's hard to look at you when you're sparkling like that," she said. Standing directly in the sunlight, his sequins threw blinding flashes every time he breathed.

"Sorry," he said, not moving.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Well," he sighed. "I'm just feeling a little betrayed, is all."

Shelly took a new hunk of mulch and flattened it out. "Betrayed, huh?"

"Yes. I thought you understood me, Shelly. I thought you got me. I thought we had a kind of kinship."

"I don't follow."

"Well, you're stuck married to that Sasquatch-hunting nutcase, and I'm stuck living next to him."

Shelly laughed. "And that means we have a kinship?"

"Nothing forges a bond like shared misery."

"Hm." She said, pounding at the mulch.

"Aren't you wondering what all this has to do with betrayal?"

Shelly leaned back on her heels. "What does all this have to do with betrayal, Donald?"

"Well, you see, your husband and I have projected our mutual animosities onto the most readily available shared object in our mutual space."

"What?"

Finally Donald moved, throwing his arms at me. The jostling of his shirt made a disco light show all over the lawn and the house. "The tree! This tree is our biggest issue, and now I see you tending to it. You're caring for it, and not in the way I've been asking you to for all these years."

"Oh," Shelly said, taking off her gloves.

"'Oh?' All you have to say to me is 'oh?' I thought you had my back, Shelly!"

"Well, I don't know where you got that idea."

"So you're taking *his* side?!"

Shelly stood up and untied her apron. "I'm not taking sides. I just wanted to do a little yard work."

"On your accursed tree!"

"Look man," Shelly sighed. "I'm working at the root of this 'accursed' tree, all right? The trunk. This clearly does not infringe upon your precious property line, which I might point out you have crossed just now."

Donald curled his lips. His right nostril twitched. “You have no idea what kind of enemy you’ve just created.”

Shelly opened her mouth to respond to that, but Donald threw back his head and made a long, groaning squeal, as if he was suddenly under the cross of an exorcist. He bunched his shoulders up by his neck and spread his arms out stiffly at his sides and waddled back to his house like that, making demon noises the whole way.

Shelly watched him go, no expression on her face whatsoever. I couldn’t smell any particular emotions on her either. Only general resignation. She turned and went into the garage without a word.

I noticed then that Gary had been watching through the screen door. He was grinning.

The blades of the chainsaw were like molten teeth chewing me. The sun had just begun to set and make art of the sky. There was a brilliant orange streak of cloud that would have been beautiful if it didn’t remind me of the burning feeling in the stumps of my amputated branches.

Donald wielded the chainsaw. He'd come running out with it over his head, gargling and yelling like some demented horror movie killer. His shirt sequins were black, and he wore black pants and black boots, with a black beanie on his head. He cut off my branches that had crossed his property line. And then he kept cutting. He hopped around in a circle around my trunk, waving his chainsaw like a toy. Pieces of me were crashing down in a deathly circle, leaves flying over the lawn like autumn.

Gary and Shelly burst out of the house. Gary was about as red and sweaty as I would have expected. But before he could launch into one of his tirades, Shelly stomped across the lawn with such fury that Gary actually jumped ahead and held her back, so that she wouldn't be disemboweled.

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING?!" She screamed. "THIS IS OUR TREE YOU CRAZY BALDING FUCK!! GET OFF OUR PROPERTY!"

Donald spun and held the chainsaw out in front of him and let it growl. "Stay back!" He said.

"YOU MOTHERFUCKER!!" Shelly seethed, flinging her hair back. Tears of rage shined on her

cheeks. Gary looped his arms under her shoulders and dragged her back.

"Jesus, honey, look out," he kept saying. "Look *out!*"

Shelly's sudden emotional investment in me was moving. Don't get me wrong about that. But I was in too much agony to be sentimental. Internally, I was wailing. Barely coherent. Maybe Donald would have stopped if he could have heard it. Or maybe not. My senses weren't clear enough at the time to smell his emotions, and he was clearly deranged.

"Stay back!" He said again, brandishing the humming blades. "You left me no choice!"

"Don, you are," Gary began, pausing to heft a thrashing Shelly. "Ugh! Fucking certifiable. You don't put that thing away I am calling the police."

"Call them," he said, raising the saw. "Go ahead, call! I'll go down with a conscience! I'll know I stood against injustice. What did you ever stand for? Either of you! Living your empty meaningless lives! And then you turn against me! You try to turn the whole neighborhood against me!"

By this point, I just barely noticed, several of the other neighbors had come out to see what was going on. Right on cue.

"You have no right!" Shelly cried. "You have no right to hurt our tree! You have no *right!*" She squirmed in Gary's arms.

"Last warning," Gary said. "Off our property. Now."

"Not yet." He revved the chainsaw, then imitated the sound of it, dripping spittle down his chin. "Not yet! Not until I get what I came here for."

"You got your branches cut," Gary argued. "What more do you want?"

"I'm not talking to you!" Donald said, pointing the end of the saw. "I'm talking to *her.*" He pointed the blade at Shelly and made another chainsaw noise with his mouth.

"What?" She raged. "What is it? What do you want? What do you *want?* Let go of me!" She snapped at Gary.

"I want an apology," he sniffed. "And an oath of allegiance."

Shelly laughed wildly. "You want an apology? Come get it. Put down your tool and let me give you one."

Donald shook his head. "Last chance. I'll let you try again."

Shelly laughed again. "Eat shit! All I'll give you is a foot in your ass! You're the human version of the liquid that farts out of a ketchup bottle!"

"Nope," Donald said. "Wrong answer."

As he spoke, he turned and swung the chainsaw into my trunk. The growl of the blades sputtered and spat chips of wood in all directions. Shelly screamed. I screamed. I felt my physical essence being cut away. For a human, this would probably feel like being strapped to an operating table and having your beating heart sawed in half. There was a moment of initial, world-shattering pain, and then delirium. Shock blew my soul out of the tree, and I found myself hovering over Shelly's lawn again. An upswell of gasps and murmurs rippled through the crowd. Donald stopped sawing and gawked up at me. Shelly grew calm and still and slumped down in the grass. She and Gary watched.

I looked back at Shelly and felt only love. I felt the love that humans feel—that dangerous, vulnerable, insane love. I tried to send it to her. I thought a psychic wave of it in her direction. The last thing I saw on Earth was her smile.

Eternity being what it is, I found myself back on the Moon with Gleegorb instantly. I only experienced a weekend on Earth, while he experienced a lifetime. But we met each other here in an equal Now.

Our experiences bled into each other. We were fully telepathic again, and could hide nothing. My soul was still colored by Shelly and the pain of chainsaw dismemberment. I was love and agony.

Gleegorb noted this and laughed.

Trails In The Afterlife

A guy in a tree told Genevieve she was going to die.

The first cold breaths of Autumn were blowing over the lake and into the park where she liked to people-watch. There had been ample viewing earlier in the afternoon, the trails congested with babbling children and selfie-taking couples. She even got to witness one mother who had all three of her kids on leashes, and would offer unsolicited explanations to passersby, saying, “I don’t want them to drown in the lake,” even though the lake was gated off.

But evening brought a grey chill, and the crowd quickly thinned out. Genevieve had zipped up her coat and rounded a curve into the woods. She walked for awhile, hypnotized by the quiet. When she heard the voice, she jumped, realizing she had lost track of time and where she was going.

“Excuse me,” it called. At first, Genevieve couldn’t tell where it came from. She twirled in a circle and looked around, but there was nobody else on the trail. “Hello!” It tried again. She couldn’t tell if the voice was male or female. “Hi!” She followed the sound up a tree about ten feet to her right and saw a blond-haired man waving at her up in the branches. He was extremely handsome; broad-shouldered and muscular; hair cropped short; perfect teeth.

Something about him was off, though. Unnatural. His eyes were the deepest blue Genevieve

had ever seen, bright and electric, like neon. And his skin was so pale that it literally glowed. Weirdest of all was his suit. It reminded her of a diver's suit—skin-tight; rippled texture; black like an abyss. There was absolutely no reflection or gloss to it. It covered the guy completely from the neck down. He held a few leaves in his gloved hand, all red or orange. Most of the leaves in the park hadn't begun to change yet, so it seemed he was collecting the few that had.

"Umm," Genevieve said, recoiling from eye contact. His eyes had gravity. She felt a powerful urge to trust him, but she didn't trust this urge. It made her think of the way poisonous flowers or Venus fly traps make themselves pretty and enticing to pull their prey in.

The stranger laughed, and his laugh was so songlike and enchanting that Genevieve laughed too, before she could stop herself. "Yes," he agreed. "Um."

His voice was the most unsettling thing about him. It was beautiful, androgynous and relaxing, but it had an odd tinny quality, like she was hearing it through a speaker.

"Why don't you come up here and join me?" He said.

Genevieve laughed again, out of pure bafflement. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Come on up," he repeated. "I want to talk to you." He smiled, which made it even harder not to like him. That smile could move markets, Genevieve thought.

"Buddy," Genevieve said, "if I try to climb that tree I will break my ass."

"Fair enough." The guy shrugged, still smiling. "Could you come closer, at least? So we can talk?"

"We're talking now," Genevieve said. "If you want to talk so much, why don't you climb down? What are you even doing up there?"

"I can't do that," he said. He didn't smile.

"Why not?"

"Someone will see."

Genevieve looked around. There was no one in sight, in any direction.

"Come stand by the trunk," the guy said. "Or wait a minute and take a ride with me. I'm leaving soon."

Genevieve knew then that she should walk away, but she didn't. She was suspiciously unafraid. "If you think I'm gonna 'take a ride' with a random guy in a tree, you must be smoking some wonky shit." The guy nodded. Genevieve added: "Just come down," though she didn't know why.

"No," he said. He was firm, but not unkind.

Genevieve shook her head. She tried to zip her coat up, but it was already totally closed. “Well,” she said, twirling the zipper in her fingers. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I wanted to let you know that you’re going to die soon.” He said it the way a receptionist would confirm a dentist appointment.

Genevieve blinked. There wasn’t a single thought in her head. She looked for one, and when no appropriate reaction presented itself, she just said: “What?”

“You’re going to die,” he said again. “Soon.”

“I…” Genevieve chuckled awkwardly. “Who the hell are you anyway? What’s your deal?”

“You can call me Erasmus,” the guy replied, looking down at his leaves and thumbing through them like a deck of cards. “I have no deal. I’m just here to tell you.”

“But who are you?”

He looked up. “Erasmus,” he said, as if that explained anything.

“But like…what do you *do?* You just hang out at parks and climb trees and tell people they’re gonna die? That can’t pay very well.”

“Not ‘people.’ You. I’m here to talk to *you*, Genevieve.”

She caught her breath, finally hit with a dose of the dread that she felt was appropriate to the situation. “How do you know my name?” She asked, almost whispering.

Erasmus shrugged. “It’s my business.”

“No,” Genevieve barked. “No, it sure isn’t. Who the fuck are you? What is this?”

“It’s all right,” Erasmus said casually.

Again, Genevieve had no reaction. She wanted to be angrier. She wanted to be frightened, and she was, but not like she should be. Her instinct, even now, was to believe him. Why? She had less trust for her doctor than this wacko in a tree. And that scared her more than Erasmus himself or anything he’d said.

She noticed that he’d been sitting there, unmoving, watching her work all this out with the patience of a kindergarten teacher. She dug for a sense of anger about this and came out with a “fuck off,” then spun and walked back the way she’d come.

“It’s all right,” Erasmus called to her back. “I’ll see you soon, Genevieve!”

She walked faster. A gust of bitter wind blew a few Autumn-colored leaves over the path.

Genevieve kept her office door at a crack. The blinds on the window of the door were closed, but she had

a sign taped to the outside that said: “Come on in! Just staying warm!” With a reassuring smiley face.

A little after nine in the morning, Candy knocked and came in. She shut the door behind her and sat in a chair across from Genevieve’s desk.

“Is this a work-related matter?” Genevieve asked.

Candy didn’t answer. Her dark brow furrowed and she fidgeted with her hands. Middle-age showed in the creases of her eyes and in the streaks of gray hair that she left uncolored, but she was an attractive woman. Genevieve thought they looked exactly the same age, which annoyed her, since Candy was fifteen years older. Every time she came into her office, which was daily, Genevieve got self-conscious and glanced at herself in her blackened computer monitors. Blond and blue-eyed, next to Candy’s brunette and brown. Genevieve’s hair was thicker, with a slight wave, and she kept it down over her shoulders, whereas Candy usually tied hers up. Candy wore more makeup. Genevieve didn’t bother with it anymore, and that left her own premature pre-wrinkles exposed. But if she wanted, she could be more attractive than Candy. If she tried. She didn’t want to try though, and she hated that, because she wanted to *want* to try.

She knew all this was petty and berated herself for thinking about any of it. It was wrong to turn a good friendship into a beauty contest, but she enjoyed the comparisons, and even enjoyed the hostility that they built up in her thoughts and in her blood, even though she never acted on any of it, because she knew these feelings were wrong. She hated that she had them and liked them despite knowing they were wrong.

She spun in her chair suddenly, realizing she'd been dwelling on all this for a solid minute, and Candy still hadn't said a word. "Hello?"

Candy blinked and looked up from the blue carpet she'd been staring at. "What?"

"I said, is this a work-related matter?"

Candy looked away. "Yeah, kinda."

Genevieve snapped her fingers in Candy's face. "Are you stoned? What is wrong with you?"

Candy made a smile. "Yes. I mean, yes, it's work-related. Not yes I'm stoned."

Genevieve stared at her. "Girl. I'm becoming concerned. Don't forget I do work for HR." She laughed.

Candy didn't laugh. "That's why I'm in here," she said. "You're HR. That means I can vent."

"Yes," Genevieve said. "You can vent to me because I'm HR, not because we've slept in the same bed."

"Or not vent, so much. Get things off my chest, or what have you."

"Yes! You can talk, and get things off your chest, or you can sit there and act like a weirdo and suspense me to death."

"Again with the bed thing," Candy said. "Stop making that sound suggestive. The hotel had one queen bed and we didn't know until we got there."

"God damn it, Miss Delayed Reaction, will you tell me what's going on with you please? I'm getting ready to have you drug tested."

Candy didn't return Genevieve's levity. She sighed and gazed around the room for a minute, as if she'd never seen the walls before. Genevieve watched her. She did have pretty eyes, very full and bright. But Genevieve was thinner. She hadn't yet developed that saggy skin thing that was beginning to happen under Candy's upper arms.

"Something weird happened," Candy finally said.

Genevieve's heart jumped. Her knee-jerk reaction was to think Candy had met Erasmus too, but she knew that was ridiculous, and was trying not

to think about him anyway. So she ignored that thought.

"Something weird is happening right now," Genevieve said.

Candy finally broke a little and chuckled. She picked up a paper clip and threw it at Genevieve. It caught in her hair. "Suck a fuck," Candy said.

Genevieve fished the paper clip out and threw it back. Candy batted it away and it tinkled into the corner.

"If you don't tell me what's going on in five seconds I am going to recommend to your manager that you be drug tested, Candice Marie."

"Nibbles drowned," Candy finally said. Nibbles was her pet rabbit.

Genevieve lolled into the back of her chair. "*Drowned?*"

"In our pool."

"What, when? Yesterday?"

Candy nodded. "Mike found him last night." Mike was her husband.

"In your pool?"

"Yes, Genie. In our pool."

Genevieve sat with her mouth open. "But. Isn't your pool closed by now? I could see my breath last night."

Candy's brow furrowed again and her fingers danced. "That's why it's so weird. We don't know how he could have gotten under the cover. I mean, it's weird enough to get out of his cage, but it happens. Animals get out of cages sometimes. Maybe one of us forgot to lock it. But like…he can't *lift* that cover and get under it. And I'm like, *pretty positive* we didn't forget to lock his cage."

"Well, weren't you *watching* him?" Genevieve flared. "How could he have gotten past you?"

Candy started to laugh, then stopped. "Are you joking?"

"Are you? I just don't understand how this could have happened. You should have seen him."

"I don't understand either," Candy said slowly. "That's why I'm in here talking to you. I almost detect a finger-point in your tone. That would be weird."

"Well, it just seems irresponsible to me!" Genevieve shot up from her chair. "He *drowned?* He couldn't have just waltzed off and drowned. Not if anyone was paying attention!"

Candy crossed her arms. "Are you kidding?"

"I'm not kidding, it's not a joke!" Genevieve yelled. "How could you let that happen? You should have been *watching!* You should have been *watching him!*"

Candy's face changed suddenly. It had been starting to boil, but then all her anger drained away. She looked at Genevieve with pity now, with an unspoken knowing.

Genevieve saw this and cut herself off. She could have extended her tirade for several minutes. She wanted to. But Candy's look, her recognition, reminded her that it would have been unreasonable.

She was still furious, but she tried to make it look like she wasn't. Candy didn't seem convinced. She stood up from her chair and turned and opened the door. She glanced back at Genevieve and left her office and said nothing.

Genevieve's post-work commute took her past the lake. It was getting so the first cozy hints of dusk sparkled orange over the water on her way home. She wanted to admire it, but thoughts of Erasmus kept butting in to her mind.

She stopped at a red light. If she turned right, it would take her into a ritzy town that she couldn't pronounce the name of, and couldn't afford to live in. But this particular street was lined with old-time shops and restaurants that were, she admitted to herself, pretty cute, even if the people who shopped at them liked the smells of their own asses. Those sidewalks made for solid people-watching, and

Genevieve occasionally made her rounds there after one of her lakeside sessions.

To her left, there was no street. There was only the lake. Just a few feet from the road was a fence overlooking the water. From there, the trails wound east, and the park widened into its own preserve of greenery. As much as Genevieve wanted to see how pretty the town looked this time of day, her attention was focused on the walkways and their slithering paths through the grass and shrubs and trees. Turning to look, she could see a few people dotting the park, small with distance, and wondered if one of them was him.

Erasmus. Why was she even still thinking about him? He was just a weirdo at a park. There was nothing new about that. Parks were where weirdos gathered. That was the appeal of going there—to observe. But this weirdo wasn't entertaining. He was *haunting* her.

A huge black pickup truck roared down the street at Genevieve's right. His light was yellow. It turned red several seconds before he reached it, but he swerved through so aggressively that his tires squealed. Genevieve's light turned green and he was still in the intersection. His muffler belched a black cloud and he tore off as it dissipated over Genevieve's windshield.

"Fuckin' asshat!" She yelled.

In a dream that night, Genevieve was caught in a wildfire. The entire woods around the lake was consumed. She was surrounded. The smell of charred wood assaulted her senses. Smoke brought a stream of tears that she constantly blinked away. Every tree in the entire park was engulfed in flame, except for one. She was kneeling in front of it, as if she'd been offering it prayers.

Erasmus was sitting in the branches of this lone tree, smiling down at her. She heard his voice, but his lips didn't move.

"Don't be afraid," he kept saying.

A ways down the footpath, there was a small child. A toddler. She couldn't see his face through the smoke, but she knew who he was. She fought with her legs, but there was no feeling in them. They were glued to the gravel path. She beat them with her fists, but they wouldn't move.

"My baby!" She pleaded to Erasmus. "Please! It's my baby!"

"Don't be afraid," Erasmus answered. "You are loved."

"Nooo!"

The little boy stumbled along the path. The wind threw clouds of black smoke and knocked him

down. Genevieve screamed his name and choked on the air. He was gone now, or at least out of sight, shrouded by debris and thickening funnels of smoke.

"Don't be afraid," Erasmus said.

A new figure appeared next to Genevieve. He was dripping as if he'd just teleported from under the lake, which Genevieve could see in the distance behind him, the water glimmering hellish orange.

The man turned his black, drenched face to Genevieve and her despair widened, became delirium. She knew what he was going to say, and he said it.

"You should have been watching him." Water trailed from his forehead and onto his lips as he spoke.

"Paul," she moaned. "No. Please."

"Don't be afraid," Erasmus cut in from above.

Paul pulled her face into his and screamed: "YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN WATCHING HIM!!"

Genevieve actually felt her heart break, physically, and this little death awakened her.

She didn't bolt upright or leap out of bed. She just lay still in her soaked sheets. Her pillowcases smelled like armpits. She took all this in, the putrid smell, the dull ceiling, the damp bed, and tried not to feel any of it. Her nightstand had a drawer, and in this

drawer was a picture of Paul, and him. Paul and him together. She thought about looking at it.

The cafe was loud and too cold. Baristas yelled order numbers and chattered amongst themselves and giggled. Customers hunched over drinks or laptops at their little tables. Couples spoke in hushed, serious tones to each other, while other friend groups laughed too loudly, making a point of being heard.

Genevieve walked in and saw Paul sitting at a table. There was one thing that hadn't changed—Paul always getting everywhere first. He was punctual, and Genevieve was not. When they were together, he would have told her just how annoyed it made him, or, if they were in company, shot her a disapproving glare. But Genevieve knew that now, emotional distance would make him too polite for that.

He hadn't noticed her yet. He looked down at his cup and rolled it between his hands, as if using it to warm them. She waved to him. He looked up and saw her and forced a smile.

Genevieve hustled to his table and made to hug him. He half-stood and wrapped one arm around the side of her. "So good to see you," Genevieve said, squeezing him tightly with both arms.

"Yeah," Paul said as they separated. "Yeah, definitely, you too." He sat back down and smiled again and went back to warming his hands over his cup.

Genevieve rolled her purse off her shoulder and sat across from him. "Clearly they didn't get the memo that the weather is changing and they can turn the AC off," she muttered.

Paul chuckled in a disapproving way. "Some corporate head makes that decision. Probably has the thing set for a certain date." He glanced around the place.

Genevieve studied him. Ten years hadn't aged him at all, at least not visibly. His black beard was a little bushier, but evenly trimmed, and hadn't yet begun to grey. Same shaved head, same perfectly clear, dark skin. His glasses were gone, and Genevieve missed them. His sport jacket was black, and all his clothes were dark. When they were together, he'd had a white one, and that together with the glasses had given him the look of a scientist, or doctor. He had known that and leaned into it, and Genevieve had loved his lack of self-consciousness, his good-humoredness. Doctor Paul, she had called him, sometimes suggestively, sometimes innocently. Now, he was serious. He seemed to want to blend in.

"So you've hung up the doctor's coat," Genevieve ribbed.

"Yeah," he shrugged, grinning a little. "Time for a change." He fingered the lid of his cup, poked at the bubbly things that indicated the type of drink underneath.

"You look good, though."

"Thanks," he said, glancing up at her. "Not so bad yourself."

They were quiet for a few minutes. Genevieve tried to concentrate on the murmur and bustle of the cafe, because the flutter in her stomach was becoming painful. She had hoped it was just initial awkwardness—nervousness about a reunion that would quickly vanish as she got swept up in it. But she could tell it was more than that now, and she could tell Paul was fighting down similar feelings, because she knew him and his signs. His lips were pulled up into a kind of closed-lipped half-smile, something he did in public when he didn't want to appear upset. His leg was pumping rapid-fire under the table, and his fingers were constantly looking for something to fidget with—if it wasn't his lid, it was the cup itself, or one of the buttons on his coat, or a packet of sugar he pulled from the little rack on the edge of the table.

"So," Genevieve probed. "Do I see on the Social that you're tying the knot soon?"

Paul drew a long breath, but he smiled again, and this one was at least partially real. It showed some of his bright, well-kept teeth. "Yeah, looks that way. It's happening fast."

Genevieve nodded. "You happy about it?"

Paul's head bobbed thoughtfully. "Yeah, you know, I think so. I think I am." He thumbed his lid some more and popped it up off the cup at one side. Genevieve realized she hadn't seen him take a sip yet. "And uh," he said. His nose twitched. He ground his teeth for a second and caught himself and stopped. "We're, uh…well, she is…ehm…pregnant." He didn't look up.

"Oh," Genevieve said. "Awesome, amazing!" She looked around, worried she'd said it too loudly. "Wow. Congratulations." She swallowed. "How far along?"

"Six months," he mumbled, still staring at his cup. He thumbed the lid some more and it fell all the way off the cup and landed with a hollow papery clack on the table.

"That's so great." Genevieve couldn't help it—a tear rolled out of her eye. She tried to catch it but missed. Even though he wasn't looking, Paul noticed.

She forced herself to giggle. “Well, I didn’t see *that* on the Social.”

“Look,” Paul said. “I know that might be a hard thing to hear about, and I don’t want to cause you any…like…” He scratched his beard and let the words hang.

“It’s not hard to hear,” she said, wiping another tear.

Paul raised an eyebrow. “No?”

Genevieve sighed. She’d always hated this about him, this ability he had to get to the bottom of her feelings before she did. “Well.” She allowed a hint of aggravation into her tone. “If you insist on knowing, my exact thoughts were that I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t do that again. I couldn’t risk it. But it doesn’t mean I’m not happy for you.”

Paul pursed his lips. “I didn’t say it did. And I didn’t insist anything.”

“All right then.” Genevieve looked away. She watched a barista talking with her hands to a coworker. In her frenzied animation, she knocked a latte off the counter with her elbow. Genevieve could hear, but not see the splatter.

“Genie,” Paul said. “I’m just moving on. I’ve got to. What am I supposed to do?”

“Don’t,” she snapped.

“Don’t what?”

"I see what you're implying, and don't. Save it."

Paul spread his hands. "I'm not implying anything."

"Yes, you are. But you're too polite to come out and say it. You and your hinting. I see that hasn't changed. A decade goes by and you still communicate in hints. I could move on if I wanted to."

"I know you could."

"And you want to get on your high horse and tell me I *should.* Don't you? I can hear it right now. I can hear you thinking it." She felt so angry that she wanted to flip the table.

"Oh my god," Paul groaned. "Forget it. Let's just change the subject."

"Great." Genevieve sniffled and wiped her eyes. "How's accounting? You still do accounting?"

Paul picked up his coffee and swiped some old crumbs off the table with this sleeve. "Yes. I still do accounting."

"Good."

"All right," he said, setting his coffee back down. "Why did you even ask to meet up today? Maybe we should just get to that."

Genevieve bit her lip. She tried to hold on to rage. It was a kind of defense. She liked it better than her real feelings. But it was slipping fast.

"I met someone," she murmured.

Paul leaned over the table a little to hear her better. "What? You met someone?"

Genevieve nodded. "The other day."

Paul's palm went up. "You met someone. Just someone? And you had to tell me?"

"He was weird," she said. "He was so, *so* weird. Everything about him didn't make sense. I couldn't…but now I can't stop thinking about him. He told me something and I can't stop thinking about it."

Paul watched her with growing concern. Genevieve thought she even detected pity in his eyes. She wanted to be angry about that, but she was beyond anger now. Momentum had left it behind.

"I can't explain it," she continued. "I can't explain it without it sounding…like…"

"Who was this guy? Where'd you meet him? Work?"

"No. At the park. I go to the park a lot lately."

"Oh, that's good," Paul said with genuine approval.

She frowned. "Why is that good?"

"Well, it's good to get out. You know, do something. Walking is good."

"That's not…" she took a breath. "Look, let's not get talking about what's 'good' for me again. We're digressing."

Paul rolled his eyes. "Sorry."

"The point isn't that I was at the park, the point is this weird fucking guy I met at the park who scared the shit out of me."

"What was he, like a creeper? What did he do? Follow you?"

"No. It wasn't…" She cleared her throat. "Nothing I tell you about this guy will make sense. So really even he isn't the point."

Paul rubbed his face. "Okay, I don't—"

"The *point* is," Genevieve said, "he made me think about things. And I wanted to talk to you."

"About what? For the love of God."

Genevieve bit her lip so hard it hurt. She paused for a long time.

"Genie," Paul said. "About what?"

Genevieve spoke so softly she could barely hear herself. "Do you blame me?"

Despite her low volume, Paul knew what she said. His face darkened and he looked away. A barista shouted a ticket number into the cafeteria in an enthusiastic and peppy way.

"Paul," Genevieve nudged.

He still wouldn't look at her, and this gave Genevieve her answer. She knew him. She knew him better than she had ever known anybody.

"I don't want to talk about that," he said, still looking off toward the front door. "I don't want to think about it. I don't want to go back there."

"You do," Genevieve said. "You do blame me, you're just too good a man to say so. And I don't blame you. I don't blame you for blaming me. It was my fault."

Paul's jaw clenched. His nostrils flared. "Just stop," he said. "Just don't."

"I should have been watching him," Genevieve gasped. "I hadn't closed the gate at the top of the stairs, I thought he'd be fine—"

"*Genie,*" Paul hissed. "Stop."

"All I did was go to the bathroom," she sobbed. "Not even a minute. I thought he'd be fine, but I should have been watching him."

"Stop!" Paul shouted. The other tables went quiet and looked over.

Paul looked around, his own eyes getting misty. When the chatter of the cafe picked up again, he leaned over the table. "We can't change it," he growled. "There's no sense doing this to yourself.

Now, I told you, I'm trying to move on. I have to. You need to stop this."

He got up to leave. Genevieve grabbed his arm. "Just tell me." He tried to gently pull away, but she held him. "Paul, *please.* I just need to hear it. Tell me you blame me. Just say it."

"Let go of me." His voice cracked.

"Paul, please!"

Paul yanked his arm so hard that Genevieve almost fell out of her chair. She lost her grip on him and flapped her arms to keep her balance. By the time she righted herself he was halfway out of the cafe.

After the cafe, Genevieve drove to the lake. Erasmus, she decided, was all she had left. Life was crazy like that. She would go to the park and to the tree where she found him the first time. If he wasn't there, she'd wait for him. She'd stay into the night. But she had a feeling he'd be there.

It wasn't long after noon. Warm. Saturday. A sky with only occasional wisps of white. Genevieve could see already that the place was swarming. Would he be there with so many people?

The road took her up a hill and around a curve that brought the lake into view, the water so green and still it looked like a sheet of stained glass in the

sun. She reached her usual stoplight and sat at the intersection and pondered.

What was she doing? This was stupid. She'd never find the same guy in the same tree. With all those people there, they'd probably seen him and called security by now. He was probably banned from the park. And even if he wasn't, *what was she doing?* What did she expect to happen if she found him? She realized that she'd never thought about it. She didn't think this through. Shocker. When did she ever think anything through?

She continued to berate herself as the light turned green. Fuck it, she thought. She stepped on the gas and decided to go home and get drunk.

All she could remember from then on were flashes. The growl of a diesel pickup. The gunshot sound of crumpled metal. Gems of shattered glass slicing her face and catching in her hair. The smell of burned rubber and singed grass. An explosion of stars and lasers and screaming tinnitus as the uprooted pole of a fence bashed her skull. An instant of weightlessness and floating window shards. Her seatbelt catching her as gravity returned and tried to throw her up through the roof. Slumping over the steering wheel as the car filled with water and the world drifted from light to dark.

There was no tunnel of light. There weren't any singing angels. But there was a park, and, ironically, a lake. This one was not gated off. Crystal water lapped at a small shore of golden sand, the shore itself encircled by forest and teeming with the music of birds, frogs, chirping insects, wind in leaves. Genevieve sat on a bench in the middle of all this, looking out at the lake. She hadn't "arrived" here—there was no entrance that she could remember. She was just present, all at once, the way dreams begin somewhere in the middle.

It was, she thought vaguely, the most peaceful place she'd ever been. The grass and trees and even the water and sand all seemed alive. The environment itself radiated joy, as if its existence was an act of celebration. But Genevieve was too dazed to enjoy it. Her sense of self was, somehow, diminished. She felt like she could dissolve into this place, into the calm bliss of it, and the place seemed to *want* her to. It encouraged surrender. It was love itself opening its arms. The sweetness of it all was terrifying. What would happen if she gave into this temptation? What would be left of her? She wasn't ready.

There was a change in the air, and she felt a presence join her on the bench. She turned and saw that it was Erasmus, sitting with one arm propped on

the bench back, smiling his hypnotic smile. His eyes undressed her soul. They were blue whirlpools, sucking in every thought and emotion she'd ever had in her life, so that she felt herself spinning to the bottom of them.

She looked away and hugged herself, afraid that she might really disintegrate. She noticed then that her clothes were oddly formal. She wore a dress so silky and white that it glowed, as all colors in this place seemed to glow. It was like wearing the sun. She had never seen this dress before, never owned one like it. The flats on her feet, colored the same brilliant white, were also unfamiliar.

"How ya doin' there, kiddo?" Erasmus said.

Genevieve shivered. "What do you want?"

Erasmus laughed, which calmed Genevieve somewhat. "'Want?'"

"Why did you bring me here?"

"Who says I brought you here?"

She glanced at him, avoided his eyes. "You said you wanted to talk to me, and now I'm here with you, talking. What do you want?"

"I don't want anything. I don't have wants."

"Ugh!" Genevieve groaned. Her frustration was actually a comfort. It made her feel earthly again. "Why are you so *dense* all the time? It's like talking to a riddle."

Erasmus went through the motion of smoothing his blond hair down, though it was so perfectly cropped that it didn't need any smoothing. "I just think that the questions with the most profound answers are the ones we ask ourselves. Why do you think you're here?"

"Well…" Genevieve thought back. She remembered snapshots—an accident. A crash. Her car had fallen into the lake. "Shit," she said. "It really happened? I'm dead?"

Erasmus touched her shoulder. "For now, yes."

She allowed his hand to rest there. The thought of him as a creepy weirdo was outdated now. It had never felt right anyway. It was a logical thought, one that made Earth-sense. But Earth logic didn't apply here. His compassion was too radiant, too vividly real. She even felt it, as if it was hers.

She watched the ripples in the lake, let the flawless turquoise-blue of the water relax her. Overhead, a few ravens were circling.

"What does that make you, then?" Genevieve asked. "Are you, like, my angel?"

Erasmus laughed. "What a flattering word. I'm afraid it gives me too much credit."

"So who are you then?"

"Who are *you?*"

"Someone who doesn't like having my questions answered with other questions."

Erasmus turned and folded his hands in his lap and gazed out at the water. "Have you ever thought about my question?"

"Have I ever thought about who I am?"

"That's what I asked."

"I mean, yeah. Generally at least, yeah."

"Oh! Wonderful. What have you concluded?"

"Well." Genevieve thought about it. A heron crept around the edge of the lake. "I'm Genevieve Winters. I work in HR for an electronics company."

Erasmus shook his head. "Nope."

Genevieve chuckled. "What do you mean, 'nope?'"

The heron jabbed its head in the water, and a fish came up splashing in its beak. It spread its huge wings and flew up into the trees with the fish still wiggling in its mouth.

"You just threw a bunch of labels at me," Erasmus said, still looking out at the water, grinning in a slight, peaceable way. "Genevieve. HR. Electronics company. Those are labels. Labels are not the things to which they refer. Who are you *really?* Underneath all your labels?"

"I was a wife," she said quickly, feeling oddly defensive. Then, she added more softly: "I was a mother."

"These are still labels," Erasmus sang.

Genevieve threw her hands in the air. "I give up, man. I thought the afterlife was supposed to be all love and light and shit. I get here and you're grilling me."

"The afterlife is what you make it," Erasmus said. "You're the one asking big questions. It just so happens that if you want to know who I am, you'll have to find out who you are. That's the only hint I'll give you."

Genevieve shook her head, but she did feel thoughtful. Something like fireflies began to glitter at the edge of the forest, though they cycled through every color imaginable, including many Genevieve couldn't have perceived on Earth.

"Wow," she breathed. "This place really is something."

Erasmus agreed in silence. They sat for a moment together and watched.

"So what happens now?" Genevieve wondered.

Erasmus slapped his knees and stood up. "Just the question I wanted to hear. Why don't you take a little stroll with me?" He held out his hand. Out

of more Earth-habit, Genevieve hesitated, but realized in a second that this reaction made no sense. Lying was impossible in a place that was generated, it seemed, by emotion. Erasmus' *emotional* intentions were as clear to Genevieve as her own, even if the meaning of his verbal judo was unclear.

They walked down a dirt path that anticipated their steps and drew itself in the grass in front of them. As they entered the forest, they could see hills rolling into existence miles ahead, sprouting trees like countless hairs. The leaves on nearer trees changed from green to autumn, creating a ripple effect that followed their pace. Flowers bloomed along the sides of the trail as it scribbled its way forward, and then died as they passed. This rhythm of birth and death was perfectly timed to their walk, with the petals reaching peaks of color and glory just as they stepped beside them.

Genevieve was overcome with a feeling of awe that had no particular source. Awe was general here. It gained in intensity with every step they took, to the point where Genevieve began to worry that it would shatter her lingering sense of humanity. She decided to ask Erasmus if that was the goal. Was he taking her to be erased? Subsumed into some formless divinity?

As she opened her mouth to ask, Erasmus stopped, and the living trail split into three separate pathways—one left, one right, and one straight ahead. New forests grew around every path, forming vernal tunnels. At the end of the left and right paths were swirling vortices of golden light. At the end of the path in front of them was complete blackness.

Erasmus stood at the intersection of the trails and held his arms straight out at his sides and made a signpost of himself. “Look left,” he said, waving his left arm. “Or look right.” He waved his right arm.

“Why?” Genevieve hugged herself again.

He brought his palms together and made a gesture like prayer. “You asked what happens next. These are your options."

Genevieve looked down the left pathway first. As she stared into the light, it morphed and became a vision. She also became the vision, in a way she couldn’t have explained. She lived the events she saw and felt all the emotions associated with them, but it happened in a timeless way. It could have been years as much as seconds spent enveloped in the scenes…

What she saw was a little girl, brunette, hazel-eyed. The girl was happy and warmhearted. She danced and sang. The girl’s joy and good nature was contagious and, as the two grew and aged together,

became more and more a part of Genevieve. There were always classes of some sort glowing on the girl's screens—singing tutorials, piano videos, art techniques, streams of art history classes. When she wanted to learn to ice skate, Genevieve brought her to all her lessons and even tried to learn with her, and in their clumsy fumbling during the first lesson, she remembered what real laughter felt like. The girl grew up and went to school. Her gift of curiosity was so great that the most stressful part of it was deciding what to major in. She became a nurse in the end, and when Genevieve was too old to care for herself, the girl cared for her.

Genevieve came out of the vision suddenly and fell backward. Erasmus caught her and held her.

"Jesus Christ!" She gasped, wiping a coat of tears from her face.

"It's all right," Erasmus said. He rubbed her back and stroked her hair. "Just take it easy."

"What the hell was that?!" She suspected the answer—had felt the answer—but she wanted Erasmus to confirm it.

"That," Erasmus said, "is what will happen if you go back."

She looked up at him. "I could go back?"

His brilliant eyes glimmered even more brightly here than on Earth. Genevieve thought of blue stars. “If you want,” he said.

“How is that possible?”

Erasmus shrugged. “They’re trying to resuscitate you as we speak.”

“Shit! How long do I have to make this decision?”

He smiled down at her and she was instantly calmed. “Time isn’t really a thing here. Just relax.”

Genevieve twisted out of his arms and looked down the opposite path. “Well,” she sniffed and took a breath. “What kind of emotional roller coaster is down that way?”

Erasmus dipped his head in a somber way. “Take a look and find out.”

She took one nervous step forward. His weird gesture wasn’t encouraging. She rolled her shoulders a bit and allowed herself to be drawn into the light again…

This time, she saw her baby. She relived his birth, felt Paul holding her hand in the hospital. Alternating waves of joy and grief swept through her as she witnessed, somehow both objectively and subjectively, the two years they’d had together as a family. There were all the same milestones, birthdays

and holidays, a trip they'd taken to Niagara Falls a few months before the accident.

And then there was the accident. Genevieve watched her son at the top of the stairs, a toy airplane soaring in his hand. His eyes were on imaginary clouds. She screamed for him, but it was no use. She didn't have a voice that he could hear. In his flight, he drifted closer to the stairs. Genevieve tried not to watch, but she had no eyes to close. All that existed now was the vision.

There was no accident. Genevieve saw herself run down the hall and snatch up her son. She picked him up and held him and yelled at him to be careful. He cried, and she held him.

The boy grew up. He and Paul and Genevieve were a family. They greyed and retired and the boy had children of his own. They enjoyed several years as grandparents before their time on Earth was up. And when that time came, the boy—now a man—held their hands as they lay down.

Genevieve came out of the vision sobbing. She collapsed in Erasmus' arms again and he held her while she wept.

When Genevieve calmed down, she looked up at Erasmus. They had fallen all the way to the ground so

that her head and shoulders lay in his lap, he sitting cross-legged, holding her head against his chest.

"Are you trying to tell me," she said, "that I can have another chance with my son?"

Erasmus gave one slow nod. "If that's what you want."

"I can just start over and live my whole life again and forget any of this ever happened, only I don't lose him? He'll never…" she trailed off. A heat of odd rage rolled in her.

"That is one of your choices."

"*Choice?!*" She erupted. "You want me to make a *choice?* I've got my unborn daughter in one hand, the son I lost in another, and you want me to *throw one of them out?* I'm supposed to just *decide* on this? What the fuck makes you think I can do that?"

"You're not 'supposed' to. You don't have to do anything. You don't have to make this decision."

He said this so gently and simply and gazed down at her with such compassion that her fury melted. She didn't want it to melt; it seemed the only appropriate emotional response to the situation. But the man had an infuriating way of repelling infuriation. It was like shouting in an enormous room and not getting an echo. He was also, she couldn't deny, one of the most gorgeous people she had ever seen. Not

in a sexual sense. It was more like looking at an artistic masterpiece. Beauty like that had a way of dispelling tension. Michelangelo couldn't touch this guy. People don't look at the Statue of David and get angry, Genevieve thought.

"Well," she said, relaxing her tone a bit. "How can I not? This is, like, a paradox. I can't make this decision, and I can't *not* make it. I mean, are you kidding? Do you see what I'm faced with here?"

"Yes," Erasmus said lightly. "But you're forgetting you have a third option."

Genevieve sat up and looked around Erasmus and down the third path, the one dead ahead. There was a black hole at the end of it, a pit of total darkness. It wasn't inviting.

"What's down there?"

Erasmus stood and coaxed Genevieve to her feet. He put his arm around her and they stood looking into the abyss. "Down there is something totally new," he said. "An absolutely fresh start. If you go that way, there will be no more Genevieve Winters. All of your favorite and most dreaded things, everything you've remembered and forgotten, all of your love and hate and fear and desire; all of your opposition to the world and all of your cooperation with it; all of your relationships and connections with people and things; all of your beauty and darkness;

everything about this individual, this personality you've adopted…it'll all fall away, like an old coat in the wind."

"Good god," Genevieve shivered. "What would be left then? What would I *be?*"

Erasmus looked at her with a glint. "Who are you now?"

Genevieve didn't answer. She stared into the emptiness, that cosmic nothing, and felt she was beginning to understand.

Erasmus came around and kissed her once on the forehead. And then he was gone. He didn't fade or dissolve on the air. There was simply no trace of him, instantly.

A red leaf danced over the intersection of the three pathways. Genevieve bent and caught it. She was alone.